AVERDE UNUSUAL CRUISE

Ex-Marine pilots laid-back river tour

By Gail Tabor The Arizona Republic 6/14/89

ndustrious and efficient, as beavers are rumored to be, he swam smoothly through the water with a tree branch in his mouth. The leaves disappeared into his den. Considering it was that time of evening, it must have been hors d'oeuvres.

Sure enough, he emerged again and swam upstream, this time climbing the bank and felling a small tree. Back into the water he slid, tree following behind.

Uh-oh. The main course was too large for the opening. Tug, tug. Nothing. It wouldn't budge an inch farther.

Studying the situation from all angles, friend beaver decided to abandon further efforts to bring his meal indoors and settled for dining al fresco. Ignoring several adolescent swimmers nearby, he munched his way through the leaves.

The gourmet scene was observed from the deck of Harry King's party boat, which plies up and down a 2-mile-long stretch of the Verde River at Camp Verde.

A boat? On the Verde? The idea inspires laughter and disbelief from most folks because they assume there's not enough water there to float a tin can, let alone a boat.

It's true there is not much water, but Kinboat, a platform attached to pontoons made from big (and empty) propane gas tanks, doesn't need much. It draws only 2 feet of water.

Even so, on this evening King says he's going to have to walk (literally) the river one more time and find a better route. Every so often, his propeller stirs up some mud, and there's an occasional "whomp" when he overruns a submerged piece of wood

His passengers on this trip don't mind. Employees of a local bank, they had gathered at King's picnic area for hot dogs and hamburgers before a cool evening cruise. The children, who had been running rampant on dry land, sat as quietly on the trip as the onshore ducks, who folded their wings and heads in anticipation of slumber.

First, though, they enjoyed a little bedtime serenade from the strings of Route 66, a Camp Verde-based band that picked and sang several of country music's greatest hits. The trio (minus a drummer on boat gigs because there isn't room for all his equipment) normally can be found at Cliff Castle Lodge on weekends.

Tonight, the notes of Wil Adams and Al Allen bounce off the limestone cliffs where Sinagua Indians used to live and play. Allen, who has furnished music for the likes of Little Jimmy Dickens, Don Gibson and Lynn Anderson, couldn't have known when he retired from life in the fast lane two years ago that his music would inspire a blue heron to whoosh silently across the water, heading for a now-empty dwelling far above the homes that line the river bank.

It certainly isn't Lake Powell or Moon River. A more appropriate description could be Lake Wobegon.

In fact, some people might think it's presumptucous of Harry King to charge a person \$7 (\$5.25 if you're in a group of six of more) for the privilege

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Ex-Marine plies Verde as laid-back tour guide

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of an hour's worth of nature-watching. If you add entertainment, the price is \$6.50 a person per hour for groups of at least 20. However, there is a two-hour minimum charge.

A lot of King's customers must think it's worth it. One particular party of 14 liked the area's seclusion and privacy. Before King could wink an eye, he was left alone behind the wheel with 14 sets of clothing. His passengers were skinny-dipping.

This is the first year King has operated his 32-passenger party boat commercially, the second for his smaller, eight-passenger paddleboat. The 44-year-old ex-Marine has lived in or near the Verde Valley for 21 years, having bought his property along the river 12 years ago.

It was five years ago that he put his small paddleboat in the water, just for the amusement of himself and his friends. They had so much fun they decided to go commercial.

So far, nobody has ever gotten rowdy. Passengers are just really happy, King says.

Nor has anyone been inebriated beyond control.

"They're not on the boat that

long," he said. "And if they dance and keep active, there's no problem."

King's sometime-assistant, 16year-old Renee Roberson, gets neryous only when there are kids on the boat. She's afraid they're going to fall in

"I've been helping him for a month," she said. "I drive the boat when he's busy, run errands, just help out. The best part is being on the water, with people, listening to them talk."

No, she's never had to fish anybody out of the water.

"All they have to do is stand up,"

she said with a laugh.

The wildlife lining King's stretch of the Verde River seems almost tame. The boat moves so slowly it doesn't startle the animals, and the music isn't loud enough to make them turn tail and run. Maybe they're biding their time, waiting for King to get tired of his labor of love and leave them alone.

For sure, King isn't getting rich from his leisurely occupation.

"I have \$17,000 (invested) in it and have made back \$400, so far," he said sheepishly.

His visitor broke out in a hearty

guffaw.

"Yeah," King muttered. "That's just what my accountant said."