

HARPERS OTHER FERRY

Falling in With a Notorious Drifter in West Virginia—With Mom's Approval

By Patrick Symmes
Special to The Washington Post

AT HALF PAST 8 in the morning, the raft was a startling sight. Resting on the banks of a quiet stretch in the Potomac, it bristled with bizarre devices and inexplicable mechanics.

The base was a gray rubber craft like many used for white-water descents. But this one had swivel seats mounted at each end, a pair of silver winches fore and aft, taut ropes running here and there, and flat metal panels mounted like wings on the sides. A set of plastic pipes ran along the port pontoon, ending in rubber tubing that looked like—in fact was—hose from a dishwasher.

The captain of this presumptuous vessel was Mark Kovach. Burly, with a walrus-like mustache and a collapsing cowboy hat that competes with his raft in its array of dangling attachments, Kovach is arguably the Potomac's most famous fishing guide, a man expert in delivering his customers through hurtling Class III rapids while narrating the history of the area and pointing out the spots where smallmouth bass congregate.

Kovach is also slightly notorious on the river for his showmanship and quirky water-borne antics, but at this point in the day he was all business, heaving even more gear on board—coolers full of beer and soda, box upon box of lures, enough fishing rods to outfit an angling tournament.

This is not what I had described to my mother on Christmas morning, seven months before. On that cold winter day, I had presented her with a tiny model raft, assembled hastily from components discovered around the house: a cheaply made souvenir yacht picked up somewhere in the Caribbean, with plastic figures from a toy set that I glued at each end. I turned pipe-cleaners into fishing poles, and attached thread to represent the fly lines. Mom stared at it for a moment, slightly confused, until I explained the gift: I was giving her a float trip, a chance to go fly-fishing for trout down a cold mountain river in the spring.

Spring came and went. By the time we got organized, it was 98 degrees outside, and the trout season had died with rising water temperatures. I called Kovach in July and booked what then seemed a poor second choice, a day-long smallmouth bass trip on the Potomac in the middle of a heat wave.



While his raft-fishers break for lunch along the upper Potomac,

The raft awaited us just above the former Dam 3, a rubble-strewn section of white water a couple of miles upstream from Harpers Ferry, W.Va. We took our seats, Kovach handed us a pair of heavy-duty fly rods, and sitting in the middle, he manned a pair of long oars that pulled us quickly into the current.

Under Kovach's guidance, we cast heavy streamer flies into swirling eddies and roaring chutes, through slow pools and grassy lanes. He maneuvered the raft from one set of rocks down to the next, and under the burning sun we sweat through a fruitless hour of casting.

My mother caught the first fish. And the second. Then she got a third hit. In the back, I flailed the water without result. I caught some sticks. A couple of rocks. Lots of weeds.

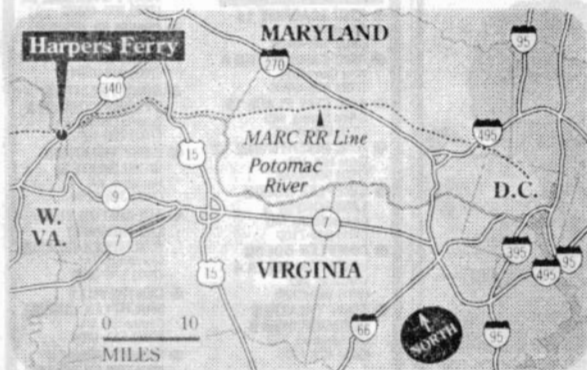
You are not supposed to compete with your mother. But I was getting steamed. Sweat ran into my eyes. My line tangled. I could feel a sunburn coming on. Mom sat up front, calmly enjoying herself.

Eventually I switched to a conventional spinning rod. For a lure, Kovach passed me an inch-long rubber grub with a dangling tail, the whole thing flecked with sparkles.

"Put it in your mouth," he advised. I looked at him like he was crazy, but obeyed. The rubber tasted of salt—it was impregnated with flavor, so that smallmouth who bit it would hold on long enough for us to set the hook. On

my first cast, I had a hit, but the fish escaped. Then another hit. The fish escaped. Then the same result again and again. Used to delicate trout fishing, I was setting the hook too gently.

"Rip his jaw off," Kovach advised, as we settled out of the rapids and approached Harpers Ferry. "Cross his eyes!"



BY BRAD WYE—THE WASHINGTON POST

apes



BY PATRICK SYMMES

guide Mark Kovach sleeps (or naps, at least) with the fishes.

He hadn't finished speaking before I had another hit and yanked the bass so hard it flew out of the water toward our boat.

From then on we caught smallmouth steadily. The raft was swept under a railroad bridge and into the gentle juncture where the Shenandoah adds its silty flow to the Potomac. Kovach bumped the craft against some mid-stream rocks and with a flick of a switch released the fore-and-aft winches so that two small anchors dropped to the bottom.

I fished on foot for a while, the forested cleft in the mountains and the town laid before me like a historical exhibit. Kovach alternated fishing tips to my mother with anecdotes about the thriving past of Harpers Ferry, including the fact that Jefferson had climbed the peak above it and found the view, as he described it in "Notes on the State of Virginia," "one of the most stupendous scenes in nature" and "worth a voyage across the Atlantic."

We broke for lunch on a small, shaded island. Kovach pulled boxes and coolers from beneath the seats of the raft and laid on a superb meal. While we ate, he picked a small channel cutting past the island and sat down. In it.

"Sometimes I just meditate for a while here," he said by way of explanation, lying down in the shallows, the water flowing over his body. He didn't move for 20 minutes.

After lunch we stayed on the right side of the now flat river, where the high trees cast a ribbon of shade over us. From time to time Kovach fell overboard. I followed his example, plunging hat and all into the cool, waist-deep water. We chatted as we drifted downstream, side by side, my mother staying aboard. Kovach drew an extra fly rod from inside one of the long plastic tubes—which he installed to protect the delicate rods—and unrolled a series of powerful, elegant casts toward the bank as we watched with envy.

Neither of us could match his skill.

The fly-fishing spark had traveled through my family in an unusual route. In the last year of his life, when my father became too ill to drive, I began chauffeuring him to his laboratory a few days a week. While he worked in-

side, I started fiddling with his old bamboo fly rod on the lawn in front of his office. I received my first and only instruction in casting as he, seated in his wheelchair, called advice out the window and across the grass, teaching me the curious blend of power and pause that makes a fly cast arc and sing.

He and I never made it to an actual trout stream. After he was gone, my mother would watch me false casting in her garden. A small store of skill thus jumped down a generation, before climbing back up the ladder of years to her. One summer she sneaked off to fly-fishing school, caught a trout and was hooked herself.

Kovach and I climbed back aboard the raft, pleasantly soaked, and we set off in silence for the final mile of the trip as dusk drifted toward us.

I swiveled my seat around to face forward. My mother was watching the shimmering sheets of current in front of her.

"Merry Christmas, Mom," I said. She didn't hear me. I sat there for a moment, disappointed. And then I realized I would not—could not—miss any more chances with the only parent I had left.

I called out again, louder. She turned around, and smiled.

"Merry Christmas to you," she said.

WAYS & MEANS

GETTING THERE: Harpers Ferry is a 55-mile, one-hour drive from the Beltway. Take I-270 to Frederick, then I-70 west for less than a mile to the first exit (No. 52), then follow Route 340 south for 16 miles. Just before the river, make a right at the flashing yellow light, Valley Road, and the outfitter is right there. MARC trains (1-800-325-7245) run out to Harpers Ferry each evening.

Book trips with Kovach or one of his guides by contacting Mike Vizas (8363 Inspiration Ave., Walkersville, Md. 21793, 301-845-2311). You'll receive detailed instructions and a map showing how to reach **River and Trail Outfitters**, just downstream from Harpers Ferry, by 8 a.m. The cost is \$330 for two people. If you don't have your own fishing gear, Kovach supplies it for \$10 per person. You also need a Maryland fishing license, which is usually available at River and Trail (call to check: 301-695-5177).

WHEN TO GO: Fishing is good now and getting better. In August, smallmouth rise eagerly to abundant white-fly hatches each evening. In September and October, plastic grubs and live crayfish attract the biggest fish of the year.

WHAT TO TAKE: A broad-brimmed hat and footwear appropriate for mucking about in a river. Felt-soled wading boots are best if you have them, otherwise grippy sneakers will do. River sandals are a poor choice for the slippery and at times jagged Potomac bottom. Waders are not necessary most of the year, as the river is pleasantly tepid. Anything not sealed in a waterproof bag will get wet, so watch your cameras.

INFORMATION: The **Harpers Ferry Visitor Center** (304-535-6157) can provide information on meals, lodging and sights.

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