

PIRACY ON CORALVILLE'S HIGH SEAS

It's not often that you are able to combine a boat ride on a sunny day with a salvage operation while solving a jumble, drinking beer and getting busted by the Iowa Coast Guard, but every now and then you get lucky.

My family business on the Coralville Strip (Frohwein Office Plus) was swallowed by the Iowa River last Thursday – such is life. On Saturday, A.J. (friend and computer network consultant) and I decided we had to try to salvage a couple of critical network routers before the water rose any higher. We doubted that the Sheriff's department would approve (there was a ban on boating), but it had to be done and it's easier to ask forgiveness than permission.

I called my brother-in-law, Gary, to see if he still had a canoe stashed behind his house. He said sure, and to come over - he might have a better option. When A.J. and I arrived, Gary was across the street helping his neighbor, Eric, prepare a small motorboat for use. (Don't worry; these are all the names you need to remember.)

Eric's boat is quite old, purchased by his wife years ago for a few bottles of wine. It looks like something that George Washington might have used to cross the Potomac, but the engine actually started while sitting on its trailer. "First pull!" Eric said declared proudly. A.J. and I quietly agreed that the canoe was probably more seaworthy but didn't want to hurt Eric's feelings so off we went.

We put into the water as close as we get yet out of sight of security people, which turned out to be where Newton Road ended in water just past Carver Hawkeye Sports Arena. We cruised down the Coralville strip in what must have been about four feet of water, snapping pictures along the way.

It only took about half an hour to salvage the equipment we needed and survey the damage so far – two feet of water in a 13,000 square-foot warehouse, and water just starting to ebb through the door of a 10,000

square-foot showroom that still contained a fair amount of new office furniture. Oh, well.

After we loaded the boat, we opened the bottles of Guinness Stout that I had the foresight to bring with me (along with two high-top rubber boots that were somehow both for left feet) and started to head back when I noticed Frohwein's marquee sign out on Highway 6 that still read:

FOLDING
CHAIRS
WITH PAD
NEW \$10 EA

I said, "I had hoped to change it to "WELCOME TO CORALVILLE WATER PARK" today, but we packed up all the extra letters and these are all we have to work with." A.J. looked at the sign for a few seconds and remarked, "Well, you could spell out 'WELCOME TO PARADISE' if you want." The rest of us looked at each other and Gary said, "How the Hell did he do that?"

I said, "That message sounds a little cynical to me," but we decided it was better than nothing. So I stood in the boat to change one side of the sign and A.J. in his waders worked on the other side using the suction cup pole designed for that purpose that we had just salvaged from the business.

"These suction cups don't work very well," he observed. "Try moistening them," I said. A.J. looked around and asked, "Did we bring any water?"

Despite A.J.'s puzzle-solving prowess, it turned out we were short an "E" but had some letters left over. Enough to spell FISH and DANG. We used a \$ instead of an S to indicate an E shortage, so the sign now reads (On both sides!):

DANG
WELCOME
TO FISH
PARADI\$

Feeling rather proud of ourselves, we started motoring back to where we parked the boat trailer when we were intercepted by four big guys in a boat with expressions on their faces like they had just smelled something bad. A couple of their caps said “Sheriff” on them, and A.J. observed, “You can buy those on the Internet, but the side of their boat says SHERIFF, too.”

Out of nowhere, two bright red johnboats that looked brand new appeared, with COAST GUARD neatly lettered on the side. Who knew that landlocked Iowa had or needed a Coast Guard?

With three law enforcement boats surrounding us, it must have looked like the Crime of the Century – I felt like Blackbeard the Pirate being commandeered by the Royal Navy. After a short, one-sided conversation, it was decided that we would proceed immediately back to our launch site, at a slow pace, with escort.

I didn’t press the legitimacy of our mission, especially since there were beer bottles scattered in the bottom of the boat, and we were snapping pictures and laughing like fools when they spotted us. So, we headed back the way we came, taking pictures of the law-enforcement flotilla that was in precise triangular formation trailing us. Eric started to rev up his outboard, saying, “Let’s see what they’ve got!” but we wisely elected not to push our luck.

Thanks in part to our Excellent Adventure, Frohwein’s was up and running again on Monday at our new digs in the former home of Heartland Express up by the Coral Ridge Mall. But life now seems a little dull in comparison.