

Mussel Minuet – Paddle Georgia 2009

June 24 – Coosawattee & Oostanaula Rivers

Distance: 17 miles

Starting Elevation: 620

Ending Elevation: 600

Obstacles/Rapids: Between miles six and eight are several small shoals.

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0 Porta Toilet at Ga. 225 Boat Ramp

Mile 4 Restrooms at Flying J Truck Stop at I-75—This pit stop is a short walk from the river up a dirt path, but make sure you leave your gear under watchful eye at the river. The path also provides access in the other direction and is a popular river access point for all comers. The heavily-used area will be obvious on river right 300 yards upstream of the bridge.

Mile 11 Ga. 136 Boat Ramp

Mile 17 Ga. 156 Boat Ramp

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—Conasauga River—Just downstream from our launch site is the much maligned and incredibly diverse Conasauga River. The river is home to 90 species of fish and 25 species of freshwater mussels, including numerous federally protected species like the finlined pocketbook mussel and the Conasauga logperch, but it is also home to an industrial complex that produces 80 percent of our nation's carpet. If you are familiar with the Dr. Seuss book, *The Lorax*, then you know the Conasauga's saga. It is one in which a small cottage industry grew into an industrial machine that has fouled this river (for the story on the industrial machine see Calhoun & Peacock Alley).

How bad was the pollution? In 1980 the City of Calhoun spent \$5 million building its new water intake on the Coosawattee and setting five and a half miles of pipe just so it wouldn't have to depend on water from the Oostanaula. The cost of treating the polluted Oostanaula to drinking water standards was such that it made more economic sense to take these drastic measures. Paddlers and fisherman who plied the Conasauga in the 70s, 80s and even into the 90s tell stories of massive fish kills, river water running the color of carpet dye and carpet lint so thick it clogged outboard motors.

Tighter regulations and lawsuits filed by environmental groups have to a large degree righted these past wrongs, but the Conasauga still feels the effects of its dirty history. A river that was once home to 45 species of mussels now can claim only 25 and those species are not found in near the abundance. Scientists estimate that only one percent of the river's original population remains.

Recently, the Conasauga has made headlines for yet another pollution problem—perfluorootanoic acids or PFOAs. The chemicals are used in the production of stain resistant carpet and teflon and have been linked to cancers in fish and identified as a likely human carcinogen by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Tests on drinking water in the Coosa Basin conducted earlier this year indicate PFOA levels below EPA's standards, but more than two times greater than the more stringent standards set by some states such as Minnesota and New Jersey. Thus far, no health advisories have been issued for PFOAs in the Coosa Basin. Within the last year, the carpet industry stopped using the chemical in the manufacture of its products.

Mile 1—Fish Weir—Built by Native Americans, these weirs pre-date the Cherokee occupation though they might have been utilized by the Cherokee, just as they were utilized by early European settlers. In fact, eventually the State of Georgia adopted laws restricting their use because they were so effective. Near this site, the Oostanaula (running north) and the Conasauga and Coosawattee (running south) all lie parallel to and within one mile of each other, separated only by two small ridges.

Mile 4—Battle of Resaca—One of the key battles of the Atlanta Campaign as Union Gen. William T. Sherman flanked, outmaneuvered and outmanned Confederate Gen. Joseph E. Johnston on his decisive march through Georgia. The battle illustrates the importance of rivers in warfare. After three days of fighting on the north side of the Oostanaula near Resaca where Confederates inflicted heavy damage on Union soldiers, on May 15 Union troops successfully crossed the Oostanaula at Lay's Ferry some 10 miles downstream. This flanking maneuver across the Confederate's natural line of defense threatened the Rebels' communications and forced them to flee across the Oostanaula at Resaca in the dead of the night. They crossed on a bridge where the US 41 bridge now stands, burning it after crossing to slow the pursuit by Union troops.

Mile 10—Calhoun Water Intake—Here sits the abandoned water intake for the City of Calhoun—its epitaph should read: Here lies an unfortunate city institution that lost its life to a solution to water pollution.

Mile 11—Calhoun & Peacock Alley—How does economic development happen? The story of Calhoun and Northwest Georgia's carpet industry points toward roads, cheap labor and technology. In 1917, the Dixie Highway (US 41) was cut through town and with it came consumers. Shortly prior to that, a local woman named Catherine Evans Whitener had revived the handcraft technique of tufting. Evans and others who learned the technique stamped familiar patterns onto blank sheets, then filled the patterns with yarn. Among the most popular items were tufted bedspreads which came to be known as chenille (the French word for "caterpillar") Locals took to hanging these bedspreads along the Highway and selling them to tourists headed to and from Florida. Of the many designs adorning the spreads, the most popular was the peacock, and soon the road came to be known as "Peacock Alley"

Capitalizing on the handcraft skills of locals and the growing demand for these products stimulated by the Dixie Highway, local merchants organized a vast "putting out" system. They established "spread houses," usually small warehouses (or homes) where patterns were stamped onto sheets. Men called haulers would then deliver the stamped sheets and yarn to thousands of rural homes in north Georgia, Tennessee, and the Carolinas. Families then sewed in the patterns. The hauler would make another round of visits to pick up the spreads, pay the tufters (or "turfers," as they sometimes called themselves), and return the products to the spread houses for finishing. Finishing involved washing the spreads in hot water to shrink them and lock in the yarn tufts.

Ultimately this led to the industrialization of the process—the creation of machines that could tuft not one stitch at a time, but several feet at a time and that moved the workers from farmhouses to factories. The remarkable success of tufted bedspreads led companies to experiment with other products, such as robes, tank sets (fuzzy covers for toilets), and small rugs. Before long these entrepreneurs perfected machines that could create room-sized carpets. By the 1950s carpet production surpassed bedspreads and by the 1960s Dalton (just north of Calhoun) became known as the carpet capital of the world. The textile industry remains the powerhouse of the local economy. Prior to the recent recession, the industry employed some 50,000 people in Northwest Georgia.

Mile 11.5—Calhoun Wastewater Treatment Plant—For a town of 13,000, Calhoun has a large wastewater treatment plant. Permitted to discharge 16 million gallons of wastewater to the Oostanaula each day, the facility's largest customer is the water intensive textile industry. The same is true upstream in Dalton where that community withdraws some 37 million gallons a day from the Conasauga River. The textile industry is the largest water user in the Oostanaula arm of the Coosa River system.

Mile 14—Lay's Ferry—Here on May 15, 1864, Union troops constructed a pontoon bridge and crossed the Oostanaula in a move that turned a stalemate in Resaca into a victory for the Union army. Wrote Union Brigadier General Elliott W. Rice of the route of a small Confederate contingency at the Battle of Lay's Ferry: "The importance of this engagement cannot be measured by the enemy's killed, captured, and wounded. The position gained placed our army on the flank of the enemy, and his communications at our mercy."

Mile 16—Washboard Mussels—Along the east bank of the river here is a gravel bar where large washboard mussels are sometimes found. Clear water and low water levels makes them easier to see on the river bottom.

