In his 1896 book, Tacitus “Tac” Hussey recounts a seven-day paddling trip from Humboldt to Des Moines on the Des Moines River. Hussey, a prominent Des Moines leader, champion of conservation, avid riverman and expert archer, believed in outdoor fitness, walking more than 12,000 miles in eight years. He inspired thousands to flock to the rivers. BELOW. The “First Annual Tac Hussey Float” re-created the 1882 river journey made by Hussey. The crew includes (back row): Al Donaldson, Bill Denton, Rick Rummel and Ron Jacobson. Front row: Adrienne Adams, writer John Wenck, John Garton and Rick Deitz.
The Saturday morning sun reflected off the parade of canoe- and kayak-topped vehicles crossing the bridge to the Humboldt access on the west side of the Des Moines River. One by one they rolled in until the lot was full. After loading dry bags full of gadgets, gear and stores into kayak hatches and over canoe gunwales, the 13 adventurers were ready to launch on what leaders of the trip coined the “First Annual Tacitus Hussey Paddle”—a 135-mile, seven-day excursion re-enacting an 1892 trip taken by Des Moines pioneer Tacitus Hussey and his pal Walter Weatherly.

Found on the dusty shelf of a used book store, Hussey’s 1896 green, cloth-covered book titled “The River Bend and Other Poems” inspired the 2008 journey. Inside, old photos of paddlers in decked canoes were interspersed with folksy poems written in the vein of James Whitcomb Riley, but the last 13 pages contained an essay titled “A River Idyl,” that detailed the adventure of Hussey and Weatherly on a Des Moines River much wilder than it is today.

Both parties enjoyed the high bluffs, rocky outcroppings, timbered ridges and boulder strewn waters between Humboldt and current day Dolliver State Park. Hussey, however, reports numerous rapids above Fort Dodge, but only a few were encountered in 2008. A reason for this inconsistency could be that the upstream pools created by the Cornbelt power dam and the large Fort Dodge hydro dam, both of which were built after Hussey and Weatherly’s journey, are concealing some of the natural rapids the two adventurers encountered.

Dams in Hussey’s day were small timber dams that powered grist, saw or woolen mills. But dams, whether small or large, impede fish. Poor fishing in the Des Moines River led Hussey in the 1880s to champion a fish passage at the well-known Meeks Brothers Dam in Bonaparte. For 16 years anglers, with Hussey at the helm, tried through lawsuit and legislation to force a fish passage. In 1902, a law condemning a portion of the dam for a fishway finally passed. However, high waters that year, followed by heavy ice out and flooding the next blew a hole in the center of the dam. To paraphrase Hussey, “Nature did in two years what we’d been trying to do for 16.”

What endears us to him today? Why follow the path of his paddle? Perhaps it’s his forward thinking in a time when smoke stacks spewing black smoke into the air was a sign of progress. In a time when few considered it important to document history, he had the foresight to save articles, photographs, programs, manuscripts and letters he later donated to the historical library before his death. In a time when dynamite and poison were used to harvest fish from rivers and lakes, he wrote editorials chastising the Iowa Fish and Game Commission for not enforcing fishing laws and encouraged fellow anglers to turn in the law breakers. He pushed for river improvements and recreational opportunities when few were doing so. But more than likely our affection for a river man like Hussey stems from the strong connection he felt toward Iowa rivers and their greenways, a connection that is slowly being re-established.

It’s hard not to notice contrasts between the historic and modern-day excursions. Since cars were extremely rare, Hussey and Weatherly hitched a ride from Des Moines to Humboldt on the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railroad with their boats and gear loaded in the baggage car. They each carried 75 pounds of cargo, and didn’t rely...
on shuttles. Stores included bacon, milk, eggs, and bread, which required them to replenish ice along the way. When out of milk, they ventured across fields and prairies to acquire it from farmers. They relied on fish they caught from the river for their supper—no colorful foil-wrapped granola bars for snacks, no pizza and beer joints to visit, no suntan lotion and no bug spray. The two slept between wool blankets atop air cushions inside their wood canoes with canvas draped over the masts. They carried camp axes and a gun, and had one set of clothes to last them the duration of the trip.

The modern day adventurers, however, drove to Humboldt in private vehicles and shuttled between developed accesses, slept in ultralight nylon tents, under shelters, in motels and even a bed and breakfast one evening. They were clothed in neoprene or warm-when-wet tops and bottoms, waterproof jackets with Gore-tex cuffs and collars and water shoes. The legs of the route were pre-paddled in the months leading up to the event by trip leader Al Donaldson, who plotted the course using a GPS unit, and with the help of his wife Ana, kept track of weather forecasts and water levels during the trip via wireless Internet and laptop computer. All felt safe and in good hands, but perhaps the sense of adventure was muted a little by such thorough and careful planning.

Hussey notes on the first page of his essay that “a cruise down an unknown river...gives one an opportunity to get away from the busy haunts of men and have a chance in the quiet of the woods, by great shadows of overhanging cliffs, or on the sweet-voiced river, to think.” Hussey was a newspaper man and book binder by trade, but his passion for rivers comes through in his poetry, which he suggests was mostly written while in his canoe or along the banks of the place he immortalized in his writings: “Thompson’s Bend”—so named because Alfred McFarland Thompson, prior to Iowa becoming a state, staked claim to 1,400 acres of land on the east bank of the Des Moines River just upstream of Center Street Dam where the river bends to the west.

When Des Moines and Polk County celebrated their semi-centennial in July 1896, Hussey led a boat parade on Thompson’s Bend. Eight canoes, 40 row boats and seven excursion steamers churned upstream in formation from the dam to the remaining undeveloped acres of the Thompson property, which was dedicated that day as Union Park. Thousands lined the banks to watch the parade, and an estimated 20,000 attended the celebration. Two years prior, the water level was reduced to an unnavigable depth because of a dam breech. Hussey sought money from ice house owners and others to repair the dam, and as a result of his successful leadership, the city named the area above the dam “Lake Tac Hussey.”

Driven by a keen interest Des Moines River history, Hussey researched and wrote about the flood of 1851, later published in the “1902 Annals of Iowa.” He also wrote about the history of steamboating on the Des Moines River, as well as other articles about local history. Hussey’s book, “Reminiscences of Early Des Moines,” includes a descriptive play-by-play account of the newly arrived immigrant Jules Parmalee’s struggle to land a large northern pike caught on artificial bait below the Center Street Dam in 1860 (Hussey notes it was the first time artificial bait was used for angling there).

Hussey, born in Terre Haute, Ind., in 1832, moved to Des Moines not because of a desire to leave, but out of obligation to his homesick brother Warren, who requested his company in 1855. Within two years of his older brother’s arrival, Warren went from a drugstore clerk to banker, left Iowa, became a gold broker, mine owner, land agent, and with partner Charles Dahler, opened several banks in the western states. By 1871, Warren was considered the wealthiest man in the U.S. Tacitus, on the other hand, remained in Des Moines until his death in 1919. His leadership in several service-oriented groups, such as the Pioneer Club, the Commercial Club, Izaak Walton League and Old Settlers’ group is a legacy to the city. His pride for his adopted state and his pride for his country led him to write two popular songs, “Iowa Beautiful Land” and “Country, Oh My Country.” “Iowa Beautiful Land” was adopted as the state song in the early 1900s and remains so today. His path in life may not have met with the monetary success of his brother—indeed, newspaper clippings hint at financial troubles encountered with his business. But when it came time for him and his wife to enter the Home for the Aged, the people of Des Moines stepped up and covered the cost of their stay.
In the late 1800s, rowing upstream for an afternoon picnic, then floating back to town under a full moon was a popular activity. Victorian fashion demanded such efforts in corsets, dresses and coats and ties. Hussey, standing with hat, fought for fish ladders on river dams, and his newspaper editorials called for conservation. Miss Allie Wyngate flies the flag of the American Canoe Association and the Des Moines Canoe Club in the late 1800s. Behind her a windmill tower provides power for two farms along Thompson's Bend, upriver from the present day Botanical Center north of downtown Des Moines. Hussey and wife Jennie paddle in 1899 just north of downtown Des Moines along the newly dedicated Union Park, an event that drew 20,000 and filled the river with boats.
In an early view of a now urbanized river, this late-1800s oil painting of Thompson's Bend in Des Moines by J.A. Forgey shows the state capitol dome in the background along with columns of smoke from downtown factories. The painting is on display in the Terrace Hill Carriage House.
“How sweet it is, to idly float
On waters strange, in sun and dew:
To hear the wild bird’s joyous note,
While cruising, in a staunch canoe.
What Joy to follow Nature’s bent,
Where roses wild, perfume the air;
To mingle with grape blossoms scent,
And breathe in Nature everywhere!”

By the fourth day of their journey, the Hussey re-enactors were finding campgrounds under water and overflowing river banks. Little did they know the continuous rains they encountered were the beginning of a historic flood even.

Despite the rain-swollen river, the Hussey re-enactors saw plenty of wildlife and were awestruck by the steep rock bluffs of Ledges State Park downstream of Boone. The fragrance of wild grapes and the colorful wild roses Hussey so often spoke of in his writings were abundant, as were other wildflowers. A fawn was spotted on one of the islands. Raptors, water birds, shorebirds and migrating warblers were observed along the way.

In 1892, Hussey and Weatherly encountered a hunter led by blood hounds on the trail of a wolf, enjoyed the repetitious calls of the whip-poor-wills, and drank “sweet water” from the “famous Willow Spring” near Corydon—now submerged under the vast expanse of Saylorville Reservoir. Although no whip-poor-wills were heard and wolves have long been extirpated from Iowa, the modern day adventurers were pleased with the abundance of wildlife they encountered.

When the modern-day adventurers arrived in Des Moines at Prospect Park, they donned party hats and attached balloons to their vessels in preparation for their approach to Thompson’s Bend. Following an ice cream social and program celebrating the life of Hussey at historic Union Park, a few drove to Woodland Cemetery to pay respect to the man. Engraved on his headstone in large letters, an epitaph read, “loved and honored by all.”

There was likely a strong connection to rivers in Victorian Iowa. Most early settlers rode on a steamboat at some point on their way to Iowa and depended on rivers to power grist mills for food. Rivers were the corridors of commerce before the railroads and highways. A popular pastime in Des Moines—spring through fall—included gathering at the river’s edge to watch steamboats arriving.

An 1865 Des Moines newspaper article noted that hundreds would gather in spring to watch chunks of ice float downstream and crash against bridge piers. Many early buildings in downtown Des Moines were built facing the river—The old Des Moines Public Library is a lasting example. Despite the ever present threat of typhoid fever, early residents still swam in the rivers. Bath houses and early versions of swimming pools dotted river shorelines before cement swimming pools were built. In winter, ice skating was popular sport on the rivers, and ice houses were busy harvesting blocks of ice to meet the demands during warmer months.

Over time, our dependence on rivers lessened and with this our appreciation of them seems to have waned. But today Iowans are beginning to recognize the intangible benefits that come from spending time within their state’s living green corridors. Currently, five recreational trails snake through the area between Thompson’s Bend and Saylorville Lake, where paddlers, rowers, power boaters, anglers, walkers, runners, hikers, cyclists, bird watchers, wildlife viewers and others enjoy a rare slice of quiet greenway positioned just north of a busy urban center. But as Hussey recognized, there will always be a need to protect and preserve these areas.
Tacitus Hussey, in dark hat, shown later in life. He cited outdoor exercise as a secret to staying fit and active while aging. River swimming, water slides, steamboat rides and afternoon rowing were popular activities in Victorian-era Des Moines. Hussey helped popularize the city river corridor with actions and inspiring words.

Adrienne Adams of Fort Dodge and Al Donaldson of Cedar Falls paddle past Ledges State Park on a week-long trip recreating Hussey’s 1892 trip.