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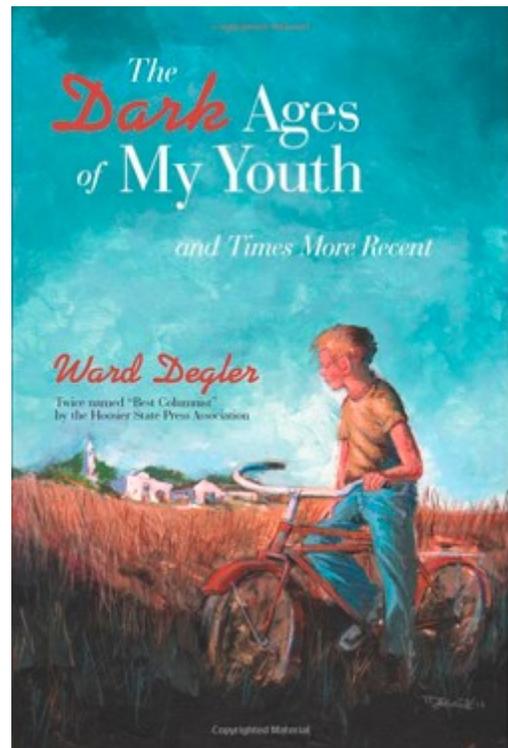
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Around the Columns

Columns collected

Ward Degler, an award-winning writer and artist, has published *The Dark Ages of My Youth and Times More Recent* (iUniverse, 2011). Degler, BJ '62, studied art at the Kansas City Art Institute and journalism at MU. He worked for the *Jefferson City (Mo.) News-Tribune* where he wrote feature stories, a weekly column and produced editorial cartoons, two of which won national awards. He later worked for The Associated Press before migrating to private business for several years. From 1994 to 2010 while working for the *Zionsville (Ind.) Times-Sentinel*, Degler wrote a column "I Was Just Thinking," which The Indiana Press Association twice named Best in Class. A selection of those columns forms his new book. *Dark Ages* was the No. 1 title on Barnes and Noble's Rising Star site in August 2011. Check out the following excerpt.



Ward Degler, BJ '62, grew up along the Current River in Missouri.

My Love Affair with Rivers

I've always had a thing about rivers, mostly because of my incurable wanderlust. Every river is a road to somewhere.

It's impossible to live on a river and not think about where you could go if you just had a raft

or a boat. Mark Twain wrote books on the subject.

As a kid I lived on the banks of the Current River in southern Missouri. This crystal blue spring-fed stream wanders through endless crags and gullies along the Missouri-Arkansas border. Bass, goggle eye, and rainbow trout abound in the eddies. Canoes and flat-bottomed Jon boats ripple silently along with the current, lulling their passengers into stuporous contentment.

I used to sit on the riverbank at Doniphan, where I attended the third grade, and watch these sated souls drift by. After a while, I began to eye a pile of scrap lumber stacked at the river's edge, while my mind began equating the size and construction of a raft that would carry me downstream. When I could stand it no longer, I spirited a hammer, saw, and some nails from my father's toolbox and began to fashion the vessel of my dreams.



Some dreams are just too big for one small boy to handle by himself, so I decided to enlist a partner. His name was Cecil Franklin Jones, and he thought we ought to “float clear down to Arkansas, maybe even to the Mississippi River.” I allowed as how we should just fool around under the bridge. Finally we reached a compromise and agreed to float down to the sawmill three miles downstream. We figured that would take about half a day, what with stops at various gravel bars along the way to explore for pirate treasure and the like. Cecil insisted his cousin who lived in the vicinity of the mill would tow us back upstream behind his motorboat.

Construction took most of a week. We had the basic raft completed in a couple of days, but we kept thinking up necessary modifications. At one point we decided the raft ought to be equipped with a cabin so we could sleep aboard at night if it ever came to that. And even if we weren't going someplace, we could use it to hold secret meetings.

The whole shebang was about eight feet long from stem to stern and about six feet from side to side. The cabin stood about three feet high and three feet square, with a slanted roof covered with real shingles we had found in a trash can behind the hardware store. We figured every good ship needs a flag, so we attached a cane fishing pole to the rear of the cabin and ran up our own national ensign. It started out to be a hand-painted version of the American

flag. Then for good measure we added a picture of a fish. I don't recall why the fish exactly, but we deemed it crucial it at the time. We also discussed building some sort of steering device, but we gave up on that when we ran out of nails. A couple of ash poles commandeered at the last moment would have to do.

The Saturday we picked for the maiden voyage dawned clear and sunny. I raced through breakfast and bolted for the door. My mother, always quick to sense portents and omens, cut me off at the porch. Where was I going in such a hurry, she wanted to know. I didn't lie. I told her Cecil Franklin and I had built something and were going to try it out. I prayed she wouldn't ask exactly what it was we had built. She didn't.

The two of us met at the river's edge where our raft waited, tied to a willow sapling. I remember stopping on the bank and scrutinizing our handiwork. I don't remember ever seeing a more beautiful craft. The food we had stowed aboard the night before was still there. We even had a jug filled with drinking water.

After checking everything out at least three times, we untied our vessel, climbed aboard, and pushed away from shore.

What happened next is unclear, but it became immediately apparent that some finer points of marine architecture and boatbuilding had been grievously overlooked. The raft began to float sideways downstream. We tried using the poles to correct the problem but only succeeded in turning it completely around so it was going downstream backward. We also discovered that planks by themselves provide little flotation. The weight of two nine-year-olds, plus the cabin, the food, and sundry odds and ends, put the vessel perilously low in the water. Moreover, when we both stood in the same place on deck, that part of the raft submerged, and our tennis shoes were awash in the icy spring water.

Frantically, we attempted to turn the raft and balance it at the same time. It seems we also had misjudged the current, which propelled us pell-mell in the direction of Arkansas. You need to understand that the Current River is a zigzag series of quiet pools, sharp turns, and white-water rapids. It was a combination of the latter two of these that got us into serious trouble about a quarter mile downstream from our launch point.

As the raft lurched into the rapids, it turned slightly, and one corner rammed hard into a protruding rock. The entire raft shuddered mightily and spun around on its axis. The second corner was now wedged in between two rocks, forcing the entire rear end under water. This sent the two crew members scrambling for the forward section. About this time the current caught the raft broadside and twisted it into an arch. Immediately, planks began breaking loose and nails popped their moorings throughout the length of the craft. Next thing I remember is everything broke apart at once, and I was in the water.

Somehow I managed to grab onto a rock and inch myself toward shore. I had lost track of Cecil Franklin, but after reaching the safety of the riverbank, I discovered he had managed to make the opposite shore. I glanced downriver in time to see the only thing remaining of our raft—the cabin—bobbing along the current like an abandoned box. There wasn't another

splinter to be seen.

By the time we had walked back to town, our clothes were fairly dry. We parted company quietly, preferring to grieve in solitude.

I think of that ill-fated adventure sometimes and wonder with brief thanksgiving what forces protect the hides of reckless little boys.

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