



Native Kansan Raids the Lost Ark

Hannes Zacharias sets off on July 8, 2018, near the Lincoln Street Dam on the Arkansas River in Wichita.

Last summer, I followed with great interest the press reports all the way from Colorado to Louisiana about a unique journey being undertaken by a notable native Kansan. While some coverage was provided in KRWA's E-mail newsletter, KRWA E-News, I was barely able to scratch the surface in that format. KRWA is happy to announce that this Kansan will be speaking at the noon luncheon on Thursday, March 28 at the KRWA annual conference in Wichita. Hannes Zacharias will discuss his adventure in greater detail.

In 1976, at the age of 22, during the summer between his junior and senior years of college, Zacharias made a solo

kayak trip down the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers, from his hometown of Dodge City, Kansas, to New Orleans, Louisiana. The purpose of that trip was largely ceremonial, to carry the key of Dodge City and his hometown mayor's Bicentennial message to the mayor of New Orleans. He told the Kansas City Star, that summer was life-changing and that it had long been a dream of his to expand upon his "Spirit of '76" experience. "I wanted to follow a drop of water all the way from the Continental Divide to the Gulf of Mexico," he said. "I want to see the places I did before, to recapture those memories and see how things have changed." After decades of

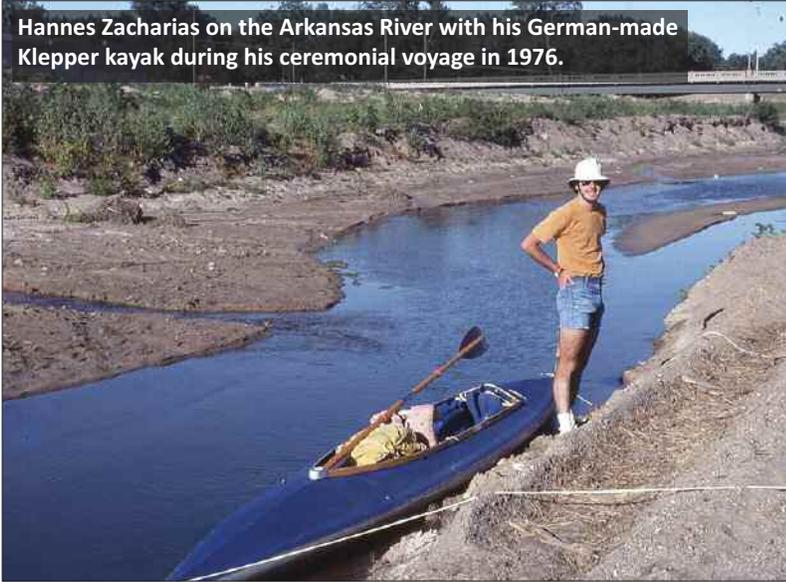
planning, he was finally in a position to do so last summer. So, on May 26, 2018, Zacharias put his kayak into the Arkansas River at Colorado's Tennessee Pass, near Leadville, to recreate the journey he made 42 years ago.

At age 64, Zacharias is a familiar name in Kansas. He was the county manager for Johnson County from 2009 to 2017, after previously serving nearly a decade as their assistant county manager. During his career in public service, Zacharias also worked for the Kansas Arts Commission and the city of Lawrence. Prior to all that he served as city manager for Hays, Kansas, from 1991 to 2001, and Boonville, Missouri.

He described in detail, his latest experience on the Arkansas River in an interview with The Hutchinson News. During June and July, traveling through Kansas grew tough around Deerfield, where the river was being diverted for irrigation ditches. To overcome that obstacle, he variously rode a horse in the water, hiked on foot in the dry streambed and had his kayak carried by

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Hannes Zacharias on the Arkansas River with his German-made Klepper kayak during his ceremonial voyage in 1976.



a covered wagon. He also traversed the dry streambed by riding an all-terrain vehicle. This is not an endurance trip, he later described to the Tulsa World. "I've had my share of floating and dragging, floating and dragging," he told the paper. "I don't have anything to prove anymore." The voyage from Wichita to the Gulf of Mexico was reportedly more predictable with good flow and commercial barge traffic.

However, Zacharias encountered a higher number of locks and dams this trip, as well as decreased streamflow.

While working for the city of Hays, Zacharias was instrumental in the city's purchase of the 7,000-acre, R-9 Ranch (or Circle-K Ranch) near Kinsley in Edwards County, along with its thirty irrigation water rights. In an interview with the Hays Daily News,



Zacharias collects snow on the Great Divide near Turquoise Lake in Colorado, to carry along his journey and ceremoniously release back into the Gulf of Mexico at the end of the trip.

published July, 4, 2018, he stated, "It was an opportunity that we felt at that point in time that we shouldn't pass up and should take advantage of." The Hays city commission was anxious to go ahead and get some resolution to

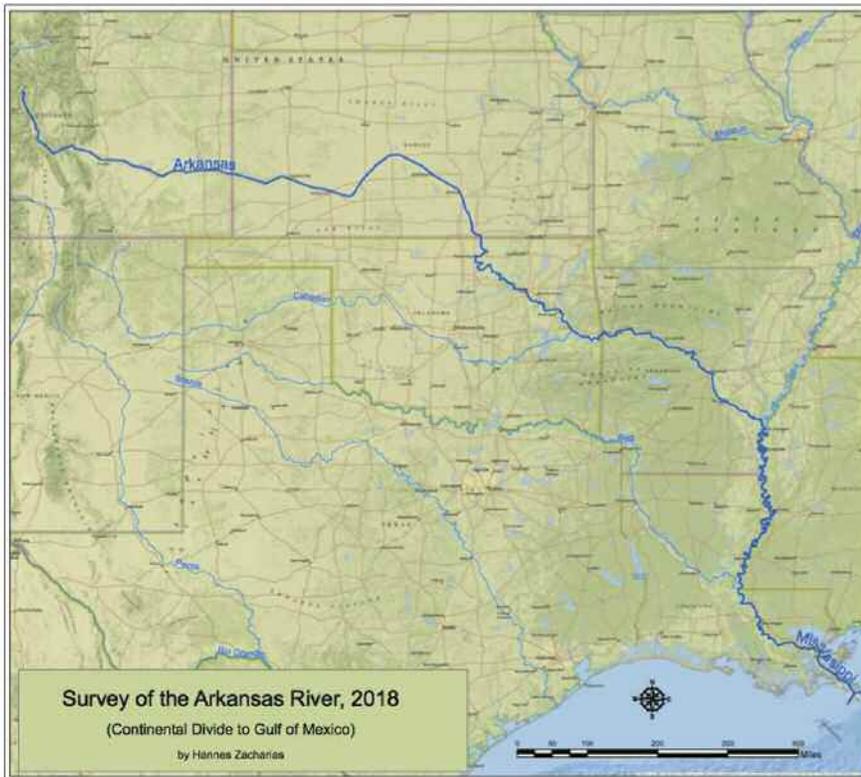
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Map of the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers. Hannes Zacharias kayaked most of the nearly 2,100 miles of river, from the Great Divide to the Gulf of Mexico during the summer of 2018 to relive a similar journey he made in 1976 and to inspire others to seek adventure.

their water supply needs and were ready to move the ball down the field. “We knew it was going to be controversial,” he told the paper. “We knew it was going to be the first effort in the state to transfer water from the Arkansas River Basin. We knew all those things were in place, that it was going to be controversial. But we also knew it was necessary to have some sort of inventory in our water rights to go after economic growth and sustainability.” On July 1, he stopped to visit the R-9 as part of his trip. He expressed to the paper that he was pleased with what he found. He remarked of the various beautiful cottonwood trees, elm trees, Osage orange, and noted the harvesting of blackberries. “The area along the Arkansas River that goes alongside the R-9 Ranch looks very healthy from my viewpoint even though there’s no flow,” he said. He also suggested that it would be nice at some point in the future to have that part of the river be kind of a walking trail, a hiking trail that people can use since it’s right on the edge of the Arkansas River. “People are starting to approach the river for its recreational value, opposed to just its commercial value.” He later told the Baton Rouge Advocate that while he understood the importance of irrigation to the agricultural economy, he would like to see changes made so that no portion of the Arkansas River is without water. “How do you call the 45th longest river in the world a river if it doesn’t exist for a good portion of it?”

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Heat exhaustion and dehydration forced him to take a break from the river for a while in Louisiana. He also recalled spending some up-close time with a 10-foot alligator.

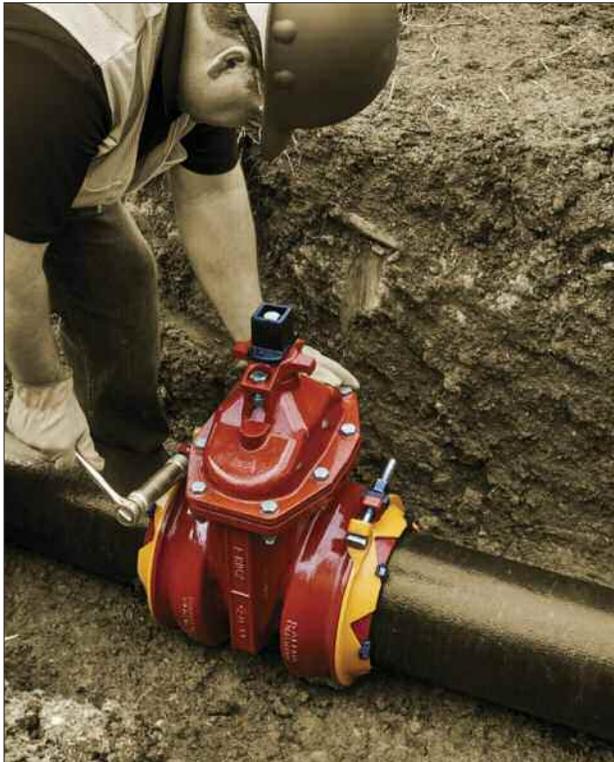


Hannes Zacharias (left) pictured with Rob White, Park Manager, Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area, just prior to his 2018 voyage.

The journey wasn't without its perils, however. In addition to paddling through stormy weather, Zacharias told The Arkansas Democrat that while floating in Colorado, he came across an unmapped low-head dam where currents can suck kayakers under water and drown them in the undertow. To avoid the structure, he floated toward the bank and encountered boulders, upon which his kayak got stuck at a 75-degree angle. He lost his paddle, which he found downriver caught in a snag. After half an hour of trying to retrieve it from the rapids, the risk of tipping over became too high, and he had to move on. "That's one of the more challenging experiences," he said. "You've got to be wise about it. Some days you just have to give up the paddle and get a new one." Heat exhaustion and dehydration forced him to take a break from the river for a while in Louisiana. He also recalled spending some up-close time with a 10-foot



Zacharias pictured with his kayak and essential gear near Turquoise Lake at the beginning of his 2018 voyage.



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Zacharias reported a higher number of locks and dams, as well as decreased streamflow, compared to his 1976 trip. Tony Hill, Lock Master for Lock No. 17 in Oklahoma helped Zacharias on his way.



During his 2018 voyage, Zacharias (left) met with community leaders and officials all along the river. Pictured with him are Garden City's Steve Cottrell, Assistant to the City Manager (center) and Fred Jones, Water Resource Manager (right).

alligator. "It's one thing to have the alligator out in the wild where they can escape, but when they're in the lock with you and they have no place to go and you don't either, that's pretty interesting," he told the Shawnee Mission Post. "He kept his distance; we kept ours, but we did a lot of eye-catching to see what's going on here." For anyone inspired by his journey, Hannes has plenty of advice: "Learn what other people have done," he told High Plains Public Radio. "Prepare and plan for it ... this is a river that can change on you, so safety is not something to be ignored."

One of the challenges the younger Zacharias faced during his 1976 trip, however, did not occur during his latest journey. While staying overnight with a friend in Tulsa in 1976, he had his kayak stolen after a night out on the town. "In the morning the kayak was gone," he told the Tulsa World. His friend came up with the idea of talking to local media. The story was picked up by The Associated Press and even made "snippet" columns in papers across the country, he said. A local mother then came forward to say she had half his kayak. "That's not something you want to hear — that someone has half your boat." The German-made Klepper he was paddling was a fold-down model. A pair of curious boys had absconded with the craft. "One kid took the skin and the other had the frame. I spent the fourth of July putting it back together and was on my way." He didn't file charges. This time around, his stay in Tulsa with his friend was more rewarding and relaxed. They took in local attractions and museums, toured Oral Roberts University and also enjoyed some Tulsa eateries and watering holes.

Describing his experiences on the Mississippi River toward the end of his journey, Zacharias told the Baton Rouge Advocate, "I don't understand why people are afraid of the Mississippi. There are no rapids, no snags." There are barges to watch out for, he said, and "any piece of water is dangerous." But, he added, the landscape and the wildlife along the river are beautiful. "The river is more beautiful than I remember it being in 1976." There are more sandbars with more greenery."

By the last week of August, he had made it to Baton Rouge, from which he planned to begin the final leg of his journey and paddle the last 100 miles of Mississippi River to Venice, Louisiana, near where the river meets the Gulf of Mexico. His wife, Marcia, two of their three children, and several friends met him there on September 1, where he placed a vial of snowmelt he collected in the Colorado mountains into the Gulf of Mexico. He told the Hutchinson News he would miss the

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On September 1, 2018, Zacharias was greeted by friends and family to celebrate the completion of his accomplishment.

solitude of spending months on the river – “something about the measured pace,” he said --but he won’t seek to repeat the solo adventure he just finished. Fulfilling this goal was a “kind of an emotional cleansing,” he told the paper. “I’m a social person. My desire to do long-extended trips by myself is past.”

Although he has mostly retired from public service, he’s not intending to slow-down any time soon. KU’s School of Public Affairs and

Administration announced last May that it had appointed Zacharias to their faculty as a professor of practice, beginning January 1, 2019. He will be teaching public administration master’s students. “I’m really looking forward to working with more students and being able to encourage them to take on the heavy work of being a public servant in today’s environment, which I think is very difficult at the federal, state or local level,” he said. “I want to be able to inspire them, to give them

the tools to be successful because that, I think, is a cornerstone of community building. I am passionate to ensure they understand it and can use it to leave our communities better than they found them.”

He also plans to use his experiences from his trips for future community presentations to Rotary clubs and others, to raise awareness, as well as to inspire other retirees. “I hope it inspires others to do their own personal adventures and helps people appreciate the beauty, splendor, and importance of the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers.”

Hannes will recap his adventures kayaking down the Ark River to the Gulf of Mexico during the 2019 KRWA Conference at the noon luncheon, Thursday, March 28.

Ken Kopp, P.G., Water Rights/Source Water Specialist, joined KRWA as Water Rights/Source Water Specialist in early 2016. He previous worked for twenty-three years at the Kansas Dept. of Agriculture, Division of Water Resources and most recently was New Application Unit Supervisor.



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