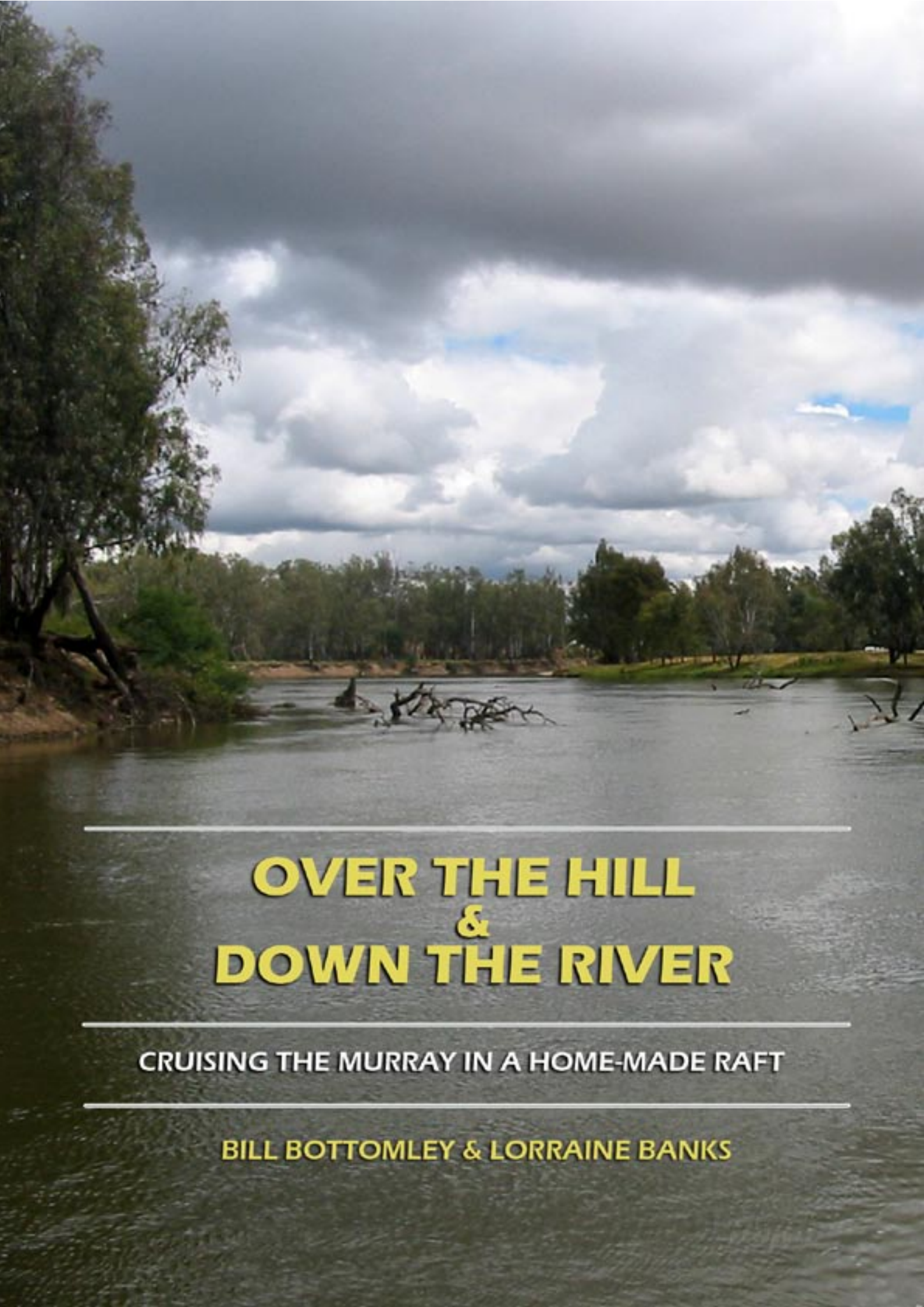


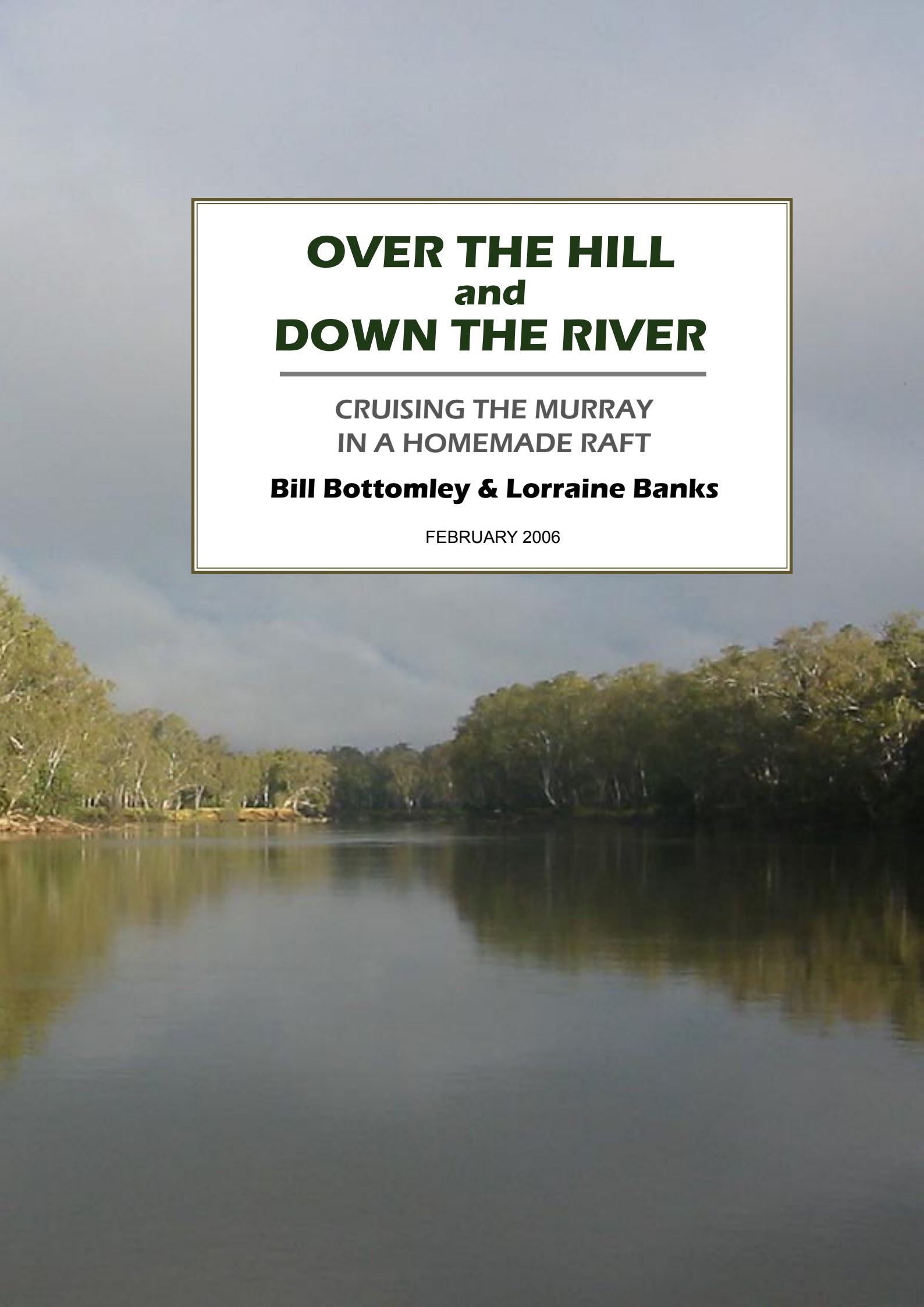
A scenic view of a river, likely the Murray River, with a cloudy sky and trees on the banks. The river is calm, and there are some fallen branches in the water. The sky is filled with large, white and grey clouds, with some blue visible. The trees on the banks are green and dense.

OVER THE HILL & DOWN THE RIVER

CRUISING THE MURRAY IN A HOME-MADE RAFT

BILL BOTTOMLEY & LORRAINE BANKS





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FEBRUARY 2006

PROLOGUE

"So you read Huckleberry Finn when you were a kid too, did you?"

"Yeah. I loved it." he answered, "I read Tom Sawyer as well, around the same time. These days I get the two mixed up a bit. But I certainly remember the part when they were on the home-made raft and drifting down the Mississippi, and how terrific I thought it would be to do something like that."

"Me too. I can remember when I was... oh, late thirties I suppose, thinking what a great thing it would be to put a tinnie in at the uppermost navigable section of the Nepean River, and make your way down to where it becomes the Hawkesbury, and keep on right down to Broken Bay. My fantasy was tying up at the jetty there just below the Newport Arms and going up for a beer to celebrate having completed the journey. God knows where I thought I was going to be able to camp over the nights on the way down, though."

"Yeah." he said, and after a thoughtful pause, "We talk about doing things like that but never seem to get around to actually doing it - though I did hear of a young bloke from Mangrove Mountain recently who did get around to doing something similar. He put a Canadian-type canoe in the water at Mangrove Creek just below the weir there, and paddled it right down the Hawkesbury and into Broken Bay. Apparently when he got below the Hawkesbury River bridges the weekend pleasure crafters seemed to find it fun to see how he handled their wash from close quarters. He got sick of being nearly swamped all the time, so when he found he was paddling past a polystyrene fruit box he grabbed it, went ashore and found a bit of a sapling, and lashed the sapling to the canoe to make an outrigger with the box tied on the end of it."

"Sounds like a pretty resourceful bloke... I was talking to a young guy in the Wisemans Ferry pub some years ago, and he and some mates had lashed a couple of doors onto half a dozen oil drums and drifted down the Hawkesbury on that. They only had a sweep oar and had to wait till the tide was going their way to do any drifting. They got pretty sunburnt, and it wasn't much chop when it rained, but they still reckoned they had a ball."

I wonder what it is about rivers, and making do, and having to be a bit resourceful, and having a bit of an adventure getting somewhere that makes it all sound a bit.... I dunno...romantic?"

He shook his head slightly and slowly. "I dunno either, but there's certainly something about it. I think of it as the Huck Finn factor. Not long ago I read a book written by a bloke called Jonathan Raban who went down the Mississippi

in an outboard-powered aluminium runabout. It made me realise how hairy – (and damp, and uncomfortable) - it would have been for Huck and Tom going down on their raft, even without the huge ships and other river traffic that makes it quite hazardous these days. But I think I found it absorbing reading because of that Huck Finn factor. It's something completely different altogether from navigating a river in a big plastic boat with GPS, depth-sounders and all the bells and whistles."

"Mmmm. Mark Twain would have known what he was writing about when he wrote about Tom and Huck on their raft. Did you know that he was skipper of a paddle wheeler on the Mississippi for quite some years?"

He nodded, "Yeah. I saw that on a doco on TV recently. I've also heard that he spent some time in Australia. Went down the Hawkesbury, apparently"

"Bugger me. I didn't know that." There was a prolonged pause in the conversation as we each became lost in our own thoughts. I was the first to break the silence. "One of the reasons we don't get around to doing things that we dream about is that when you're young and fit enough to be a bit adventurous you're usually dreaming about them while you're surrounded by chores to be done, lawns to be mowed, and the choices of what you might do are very much limited by what would be best for the kids. You usually only have a couple of weeks a year where you have the chance to do anything different to the workaday grind, and whatever you decide to do would have to be, quite reasonably I suppose, wholly family-oriented. All those domestic and parental responsibilities, mortgages and the demands of a career of some sort – as Zorba would say: "the full catastrophe" – they all make it so that there's not all that much room to move. Then when you've come through the funnel at the end of that phase of your life you're pretty much a fucked unit anyway, and too old and unfit to consider anything much at all adventurous."

"Too true. But didn't somebody tell me that you drifted down the Murray on a raft not all that long ago? And I hope you don't mind me saying it, but you're no spring chicken."

"Yeah. My best mate Lorraine and I made a rather elaborate raft and went 300kms down the Murray. This was back in November 2004. When we embarked on the project we intended to go all the way down the river – it's 2000 clicks from Yarrawonga to the river mouth at Goolwa - but we ended up only doing the first leg from Yarrawonga to Echuca for various reasons."

"I see. What was it like?"

"Well, it was a mixture of a lot of things, I suppose. It'd be a bit hard to know what to pick out to tell you about. Put it this way: it certainly turned out a bit different to what we had anticipated when we were planning it."

"Now you've got me curious. Tell me what happened. Go on - I'm really interested in this sort of thing."

"What? You want the lot?"

"Yeah. The lot. Go on... I won't get bored. Promise."

There is a long pause – then, reluctantly: "Oh, OK. What the hell. I'll give it a go... (another pause) ... Ah! Here's Lorraine back. Let's order another round and she can throw in her two cents worth as well."



THE BEGINNINGS

Lorraine had driven and camped a lot of Australia by the time I met her some nine years ago, just before I turned 60. As anyone who gets to know her soon notices, she is very, very competent across a wide range of accomplishments. (I can remember being quite impressed to find, on my first visit to her place for a meal, that she knew what an Acrow prop is.) It wasn't very long after we'd decided to hang together for a while that we invested in a camper-trailer and started to drive and camp a whole lot more of Oz together. Over the years Lo had developed the habit of keeping some sort of record of each trip because she maintained (and rightly, I've come to believe) that it doesn't take long after you get back for the details to fade of where you went and what you did, and the trip gets reduced in your memory to a handful of disjointed recollections. We decided to build The Raft early in 2002, and after several weeks she had begun to keep notes about the whole project the way she does for our camping trips. Here's an extract from her first jottings:

It was a Saturday afternoon early in March 2002. Bill and I were sitting in the shade of the wisteria at his place, having a late afternoon drink together. Neither of us was well – me with the ongoing aches and pains of the polymyalgia I have had for 2 1/2 years, Bill with the random aches of some unknown disease of a migratory arthralgic nature. All a bit depressing, really. Bill in particular was finding it difficult to get enthused about anything. He's at a loose end if he doesn't have a project on the go, but no ideas beckoned to him and each day was just blending into the next. We were discussing this in the late afternoon warmth, and sharing ideas of things we might do, what we would like to fit into the remaining years we have on this planet, knowing also that we could not undertake anything too adventurous or demanding, as goodness knows if and when our health would improve.

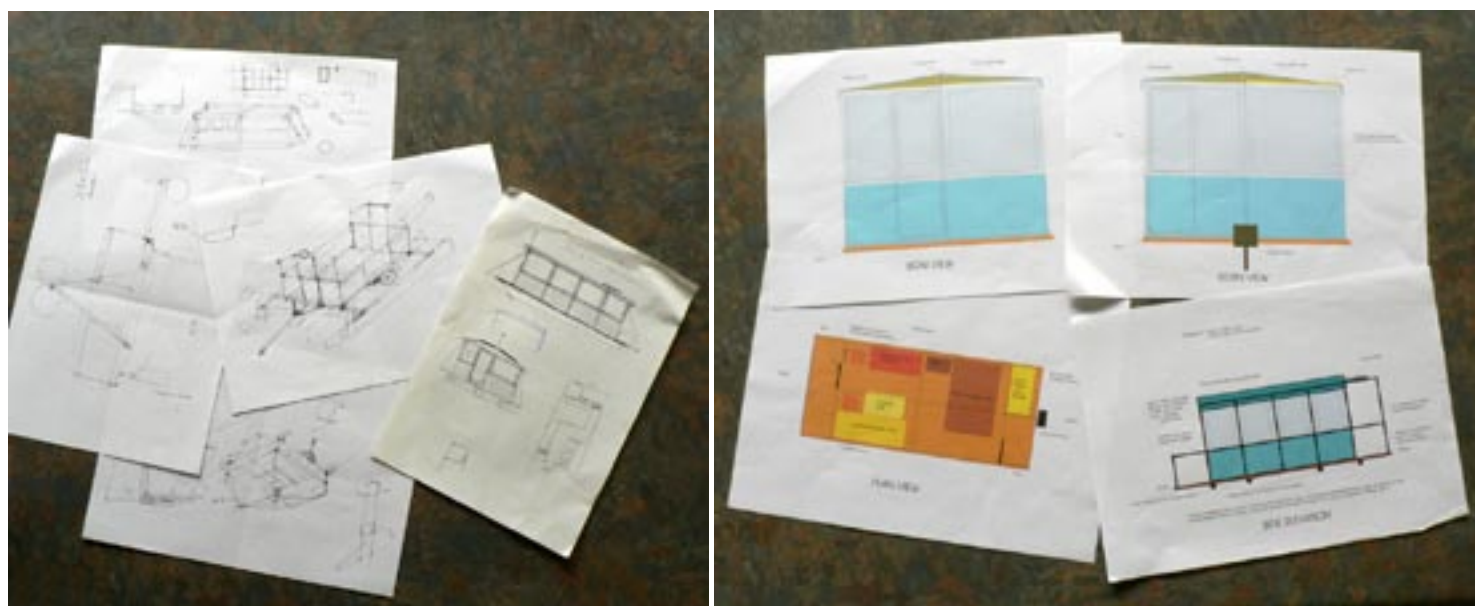
One of the regrets I voiced was the fact that I had always wanted to canoe down the Murray River – and the Darling, for that matter – but the opportunity to put together a support team, to either accompany me or to drive along and provide a few comforts such as food and a bed had never eventuated. I explained to Bill that I had not envisaged doing some sort of canoe marathon, but rather a lazy paddle down the river, stopping to enjoy the scenery and anything else that appealed. No time frame – just amble down the river. What fun, we both agreed, but quite impossible for the pair of semi-cripples that we had both become of late. That much paddling was simply out of the question.

Then Bill started talking about a raft – a Huckleberry Finn-type raft – just a basic shelter that floated with the current. The seed was sown. We opened another bottle as the idea just grew and grew. Options were canvassed, discussed,

rejected or included as the concept developed. We would not consider buying a vessel, we would make it ourselves. It would be as basic as possible, but include the comforts we have come to enjoy in the thousands of kilometres we have travelled in our campertrailer, the Canvas Hilton. Now we were talking a Floating Hilton. It would need a comfortable bed (a prerequisite for our aching joints), a fridge (because we like our white wine chilled and ice with our scotch) and basic cooking and washing facilities. A bit like the campertrailer on floats.

By the time we went to bed that night we had done little except talk about the raft. Even when we rolled over during the night, or stretched to ease the aching joints and muscles (the pain is worse at night), one or other of us would make a suggestion, a “what if we tried it this way” or “what about this”. Our brains had not switched off the raft, even though we were asleep. We both dreamt raft all night.

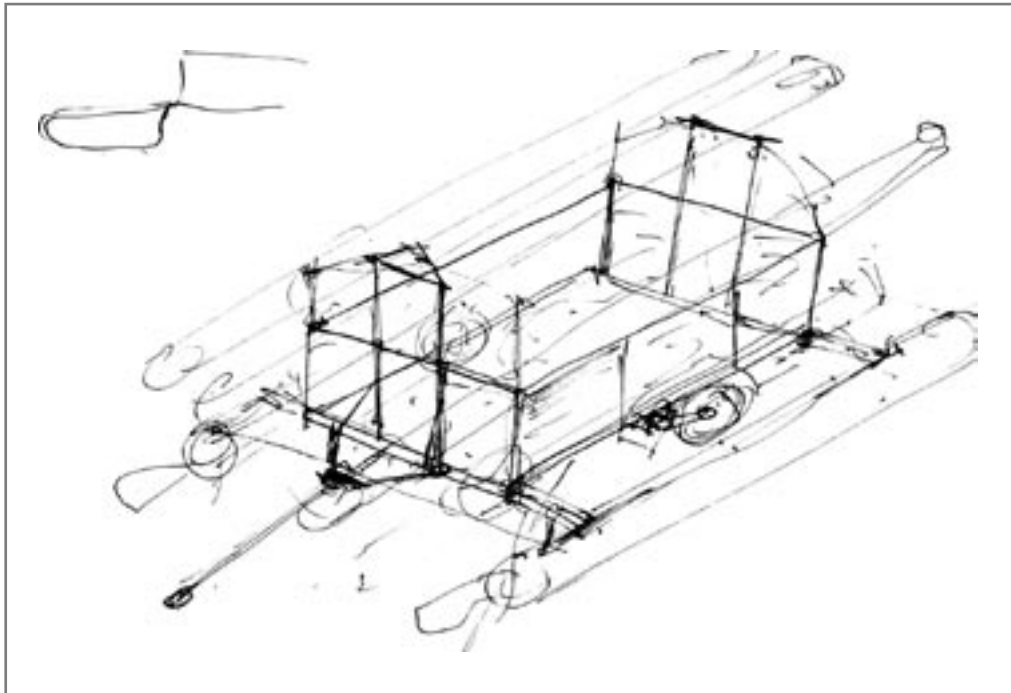
In the cold light of morning we half-expected our enthusiasm to have diminished a bit. We tried to think of all the reasons why we couldn’t build a raft and drift down the Murray. None of them was convincing. The idea just took hold more and more strongly. By mid-morning we were drawing sketches, talking structural materials, trying to continue the philosophy by which Bill had built his house – use recycled and secondhand materials wherever possible. Develop the most basic structural design then scrounge around to get the best deal on materials – leftovers, offcuts, secondhand, whatever. We would have the raft basically as open as possible, but the shelter would have to be screened so we wouldn’t be driven mad by mozzies and flies.



After a while of thinking these things through, gradually we realised that what we were embarking upon was a bloody sight bigger and more complicated than we had at first thought. For instance, it’s all very well to talk about drifting down the river, but we would have to have some way of making the raft go where we wanted it to. What would we power it with so that we could manoeuvre up to wharves and go upcurrent to tie up along the river bank? – not to mention being able to get out of the way of other craft who might find themselves in our drifting trajectory, or the necessity of being able to steer ourselves in and out of locks. I don’t remember what Mark Twain had Huck and Tom do about these matters but we were, so to speak, in the same boat.

The most obvious way to go would be to use a petrol motor – outboard in our case - like pretty well everyone else does. We didn't like that idea on two grounds: motors are noisy, and you have to carry fuel for them. We began to investigate the possibility of using one of the electric outboards which had recently been introduced to Oz, made to troll quietly for bass in the lakes of the US. My house has no mains power and gets all its energy from the sun and this option was one we found attractive. Lorraine's brother-in-law had been O/C everything electronic in the development of the *Solar Sailor*, an extremely high-tech, solar-powered ferry which had been introduced to Sydney Harbour just in time for the Olympics, so we consulted him about going electric with the raft.

His reply was nope. It would take too many panels, and batteries, and be far too expensive for our sort of budget as well as being probably too heavy. This cast us into the Slough of Despond, as the thought of a noisy, environmentally unhelpful, gas-guzzling motor was the last thing we wanted. It just didn't jibe with our original fantasies of noiselessly drifting down through a riverine paradise on Australia's mightiest river. We just didn't want to hear this sort of advice. What is it Simon & Garfunkel sang? "A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest". Just how much we didn't want to hear it will become evident later on.



We began telling our family and friends about our plans. Virtually everyone thought it was a great idea, with most expressing a degree of envy that they weren't the ones doing it, but some of those who were aware of our physical limitations were a bit sceptical as to whether we could actually build it and drive it, given our creeping senescence. We figured that we'd work on it on our good days, and that it didn't matter if it took a couple of years to accomplish. Leisurely enjoyment of the whole shebang, from construction to making the trip, was to be the watchword of this project. At least, that's what we used to say to one another.

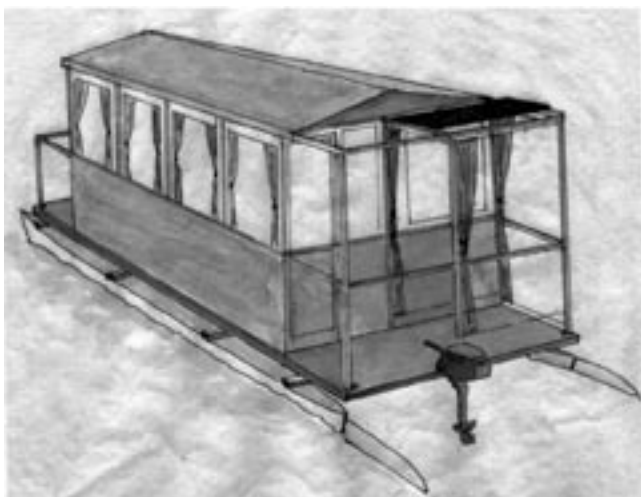
Enter Kent Shaw. Kent is a mate I met 20-odd years ago when we were both building our houses out of mud, bush poles and recycled materials in the hills

at the back of the Yarramalong Valley. Being 'alternative builders' together gave us much in common, and we've kept pretty close contact over the intervening years. When Lo and I filled him in on the raft venture his eyes lit up immediately. It was the sort of thing that was right up his alley.



He's a very bright bloke with a very broad range of knowledge and skills, and it was inevitable that we came to rely on him as the phone call of first resort whenever we wanted some technical advice on just about anything. If he didn't know the answer he usually knew the best way to go about getting it. Also, he was younger and fitter than me. So it was only a matter of a week or so before we invited him to formally join the project. We'd put up the money and he'd provide technical assistance in all sorts of ways – in more ways than any of us expected, as will become clear

later on. The whole thing wouldn't have happened without him, and God knows what the raft would have looked like and behaved like had we built it without Kent's considerable participation. In effect, the project now had its own resident marine engineer. At the time he was Chief Engineer on the *Wako*, one of the Newcastle tugs. His shiftwork schedule was such that in return for extended periods on the tug (I mean working on the *Wako*, not the other) he got extended periods off, which enabled him to spend more time working on raft stuff than he would have been able to do with a more conventional job. Things were getting seriously underway.



One of the most intractable problems we encountered early on was trying to get some idea of how the raft would steer, given that it would be going at the same rate as the current for most of the time. With no forward motion in relation to the current would it just lazily rotate like a leaf being carried along, or would the rudder be able to keep it oriented the way

we wanted it? We spoke to quite a few people about this who were seasoned sailors, but no-one was prepared to come up with much in the way of a confident prediction. Kent leant towards the hunch that the basic inertia of the raft would offer some resistance to the current, however slight, and therefore we would actually proceed a bit slower than the current, hopefully giving us some steering capability. Lorraine and I favoured trying a biggish sweep oar from the back, so we could just row the stern around to the orientation we wanted and thus keep it all facing the right way. As it turned out, we had to wait till we had built the raft and were doing trials with it in Dora Creek before we got the answer to this problem.

Another obvious early preoccupation was what we would use for buoyancy – what were we going to float the raft deck on? We pretty quickly came to favour using a couple of large-diameter poly-pipes to do the job, and we set about finding someone to supply them and heat-weld watertight end-caps on them. After a fair bit of letting our fingers do the walking through the Yellow Pages and the Net we eventually found an outfit at Sandgate that dealt in polypipe of ample diameters. Lo and I dropped up to have a look at the big pipes, and to have a bit of a talk to the manager about the feasibility of what we were going to do. He saw no problems, and showed us photos of several marina-type pontoons they'd made. We had a bit more planning to do before we knew just how long we were going to want the pipes, so we went into another three-way huddle back home and decided that 6metres long and 400mm in diameter should do the trick. (We were talking to Lorraine's Dad about this around this time, and I was more than a little impressed that, when we told him the dimensions of the pontoons, he was able to do a bit of mental arithmetic and come up with how many kilograms it should support. He was almost 90 at the time.)

I emailed the details through to the plastic pipe fabricators and asked for a quote. Two weeks later we'd heard nothing back from them, so I emailed a memory-jogger to them. Two days later we had a reply: \$1250 each! I deduced from this that for some reason they probably didn't want the job. If that wasn't the case, then they were really trying one on. Here's what Lorraine had to say about where we went from this considerable setback:

I was telling Dad that this cost would virtually sink the raft project, unless we could find an alternative form of flotation. Dad, bless him, a frequenter of garage sales, had seen a catamaran for sale the previous weekend. He thought it was about 18-20 feet long, and it was on a trailer. But he couldn't remember where he saw it, as he had been to several garage sales that day. On their way home, he and Jean retraced their steps to the various sales they went to, recognised the house, and found the catamaran still sitting unsold in the back yard. He phoned us immediately with the address and contact details, and we were around there the next day, quick smart. Kent came along as well, to have a look from his marine engineer's perspective, and to help us decide if the fibreglass hulls of an Olympic A-Class catamaran built in the early 70s would serve as floats for the raft. Indeed they would, we all thought.



\$650 changed hands, and we drove away with the catamaran on the trailer behind Bill's little Feroza. The trailer and cat looked to be three times as long as the car. Now that we owned this Olympic A-class catamaran, we had to find out if the hulls would be bouyant enough to support the weight of the super-

structure, plus three or four people. We invited a number of friends over for the afternoon, and took the catamaran down to the reserve on Dora Creek behind my house. We had removed the mast and any other easily removable items. Just as we went to launch it, the heavens opened. We sat inside watching and waiting for the rain to stop. Eventually it did. Back down to the creek, and we put the catamaran into the water - it was so light and easy to launch. Then we climbed on, one by one, with me checking the water level on the side as each person boarded.



With 9 people on board, the back of the cat hulls were almost under, but there was still quite a bit of freeboard at the front (most of us were on the back half of the catamaran). Then as everyone got off, I weighed them. 730 Kilograms altogether, and clearly she would have taken a bit more. So we concluded that the catamaran hulls should well and truly do the job of supporting the raft.

We dragged it back into the backyard and began making plans again.

A RECONNAISSANCE TRIP

We only conceived of the whole raft idea in March, and even before then we had some half-made plans to take the campertrailer down to Victoria and drive the Great Ocean Road just after Easter, in April. Once the raft idea was well and truly on the agenda, while we were preparing for the Great Ocean Road trip we realised that constructing the raft was one thing, but that there was a helluva lot of research we had to do about the river itself, and other river-related matters. Here's Lo again:

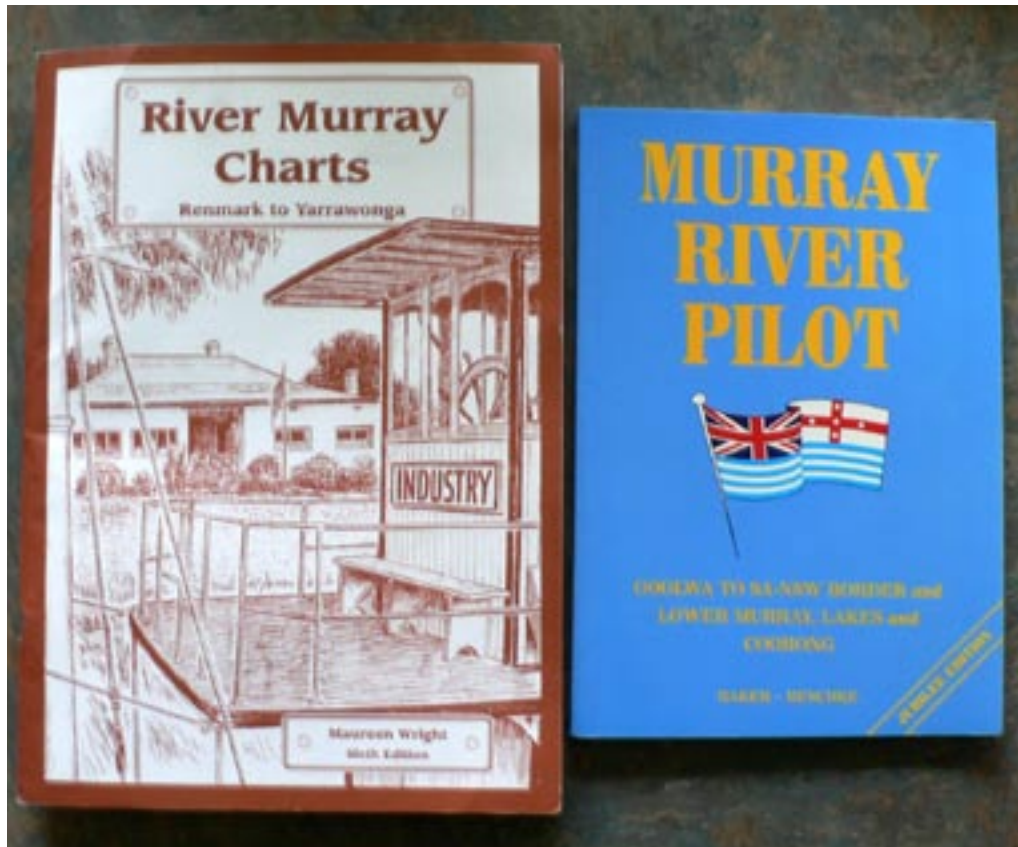
We needed to know a lot more about the Murray River. We planned to do the Murray in several stages. Rather than spending months drifting down the river we would choose the most suitable times of the year for weather and for river flows, and spend a month or six weeks at a time. Then we would take the raft ashore, dismantle it, and find somewhere to store it until we were ready to do the next leg. We didn't mind if it took a few years to go down the river all the way to Goolwa (at the mouth) - that would be OK with us.

Other questions needed answering. Where could we launch the raft? How would we deal with locks and weirs? Where are the locks and weirs, and how many of them are there? How fast does the current flow? Would it be easy to find places to moor at night? We realized that the Ocean Road camping trip was going to be an ideal opportunity to answer these questions.

As we got to the Victorian border and crossed the Murray above Albury, the river beckoned, so we turned downstream and followed the river to Echuca. The weir at Yarrawonga just downstream of Albury did not have a lock, so, a bit disappointed that we could not easily do the upper reaches of the Murray, we accepted we would have to launch the raft just below the Yarrawonga weir.



But it was still almost exactly 2000 kilometres to the mouth of the river from Yarrawonga. Two thousand kilometres of drifting sounded pretty good to us. We explored various forests along the riverbank, following miles of tracks through the floodplains, studded with beautiful river redgums. The end of that day saw



us poking around the depths of the Barmah Forest where we camped for the night on the riverbank - (without seeing a single mosquito).

We picked up a book of river charts at Echuca. We had mail-ordered another book which covered the section upstream of Mildura, and anticipated it would be waiting in the letter box when we got home. We went to tourist information centres and I gathered leaflets, bus timetables, boating information - anything that seemed relevant.

I used to watch in a somewhat bemused fashion as Lorraine would collect all these folders and brochures at the Tourist Information places. On any long camping trip we've made together, the petrol consumption on the way home is nearly always compromised by the added weight of the leaflets, maps and booklets that accumulate along the way. Initially I would tend to make jokes about this propensity, but I soon learned that it was actually an incredibly helpful and rational addiction. Many's the time we've been looking for something particular in an unfamiliar part of the world when Lo will dive into this incredible heap of publicity bumf and tourismspeak, miraculously come up with the right pamphlet with a local map... and there we were! (This skill/hobby was to prove particularly useful as the first leg of our trip down the river drew to a close). She's the same with map-reading. "Ummm, there's a bit of a creek crossing coming up within the next couple of ks – soon after the pecan orchard on your right might be a nice place there to stop for mornos." There usually is.

We talked to people about what we were planning - and the response was invariably positive. They couldn't wait to help us. The lady at the motel where we stayed at Wahgunyah was a mine of information about flows and water releases from the Hume Dam, about minor floods and their impact. People gave us contact numbers and places to visit to talk to others who may have had more detailed information.

We left the river at Echuca and headed south to drive the Great Ocean Road, but the Murray kept pulling us back. From Port Fairy we headed due north again, up to join the Murray at Mildura. More information and more helpful people. We talked to the lockmaster at Wentworth, and he was a gem. Told us about the various regulations we would need to meet when we got to South Australia - they have much tougher boating laws than NSW and Victoria.



He also told us about a Huck Finn-type raft a little way back up the river, which we went and had a look at. It was pretty rough, and we reckoned ours would be better. We also saw a real "Floating Hilton" and stopped to talk to the owners about it - it was like a large modern caravan, with everything that opens and shuts - except that it was on a trailer ready to launch into the river. A bit out of our league though, at over \$30,000 new! And anyway we wanted the challenge of building the boat ourselves.
