Smithsonian's Stories from Main Street Podcast
Season 1, Episode 5: "Over and Under"
Transcript

Episode Description: We sometimes take for granted that we humans have figured out how to swim and dive and travel across great bodies of water on boats. But it's really quite amazing when you think about it. In this episode, we're soaking in stories about swimming, diving, and boating...about leaving our natural habitat behind to explore.

Stories used in this episode:

- Hok-Si-La Municipal Park, Minnesota--Kathryn and Mathew McGrady
- Swimming with a Horse in Minnesota
- Diving in Minnesota Lakes--Gary Thompson
- Diving Beyond the Cliff, Caribbean Sea
- Kayaking with Seals, Maine
- Mississippi Gulf Coast Waterways
- The Green Dean and Hurricane Gloria, Massachusetts
- The Ocean as a Retreat, California
- Canoeing Adventures in Minnesota--Mark Bosacker

Episode Transcript:

Mark Bosacker: I started paddling as soon as I could. I always loved the water. I remember reading Huckleberry Finn and how he found that canoe in the Mississippi River, and I tried to build a canoe in grade school, third, fourth grade. I saved my money and sent away for a canoe kit, but it wasn't a very good one. My canoe building skills weren't up to the job so it never floated.

My name is Mark Bosacker, I'm a long time member of the Mankato Paddling and Outings Club. I like the fast rivers better because they're exciting. You see the trees rushing by you and you have to look ahead and be on your guard, be prepared to turn or pull over to the side or try to back paddle and then there's usually wildlife of one sort or another. And the sound of the rushing water and the smell—hopefully it's a good smell. Most of the time it is–not always.

I've been in situations where I got in over my head, so to speak. This was the Blue Earth down by Amboy. It was very high. When it's low it stays in its banks. Well these were very wooded banks, the current is going right through the trees. So we'd have to paddle hard in one direction to keep from being swept into the trees and then the other direction we'd come around one corner we hear this crackling noise. I thought we scared some deer. That was the first thought that came to my mind. We scared a herd of deer and they're running through the bushes. And then it sounded like escaped elk...bigger...from the nearby elk farm.

Then it sounded like elephants. All this popping and cracking sounded like a tear in the fabric of reality and then I look up, and I see this tree start to slowly come. It was a big cottonwood. And we're going this way and the tree is...we're going to have an intersection. I knew if it hit us we would die, well, pretty good chance of it. Trees are heavy and if it's holding you down underwater, there's not much to do. So I yell to my buddy to back paddle, and we both back paddled as hard as we could. And it didn't hit us, but it fell down close enough to us that we both got wet. They're fun when they are high like that. Fun, but dangerous and destructive.

I'm Hannah Hethmon, and this is episode five of Stories from Main Street: Water/Ways, a podcast from Museum on Main Street.

For 25 years, Museum on Main Street, a program of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, has brought Smithsonian exhibitions to small towns and asked the people in these diverse communities to make the exhibits their own. Through its Stories from Main Street initiative, Museum on Main Street encourages the gathering of stories, stories that give a voice to rural Americans.

Since 2016, Museum on Main Street's Water/Ways exhibition has been traveling all over America, stopping for six weeks at a time in over 100 small towns. The stories in this series were collected as part of the programming around that exhibition. They're raw, they're real, and, as such, they're a unique window into America, a country as ever-changing, multi-faceted, and diverse as the waterways that cover our continent.

Hannah S.: My favorite thing to do, no matter what body of water it is or how cold it is, is to run into the ocean and put my feet in so I can feel connected. Because when you are in that body of water you really are connected to everything. That body of water, regardless of how many oceans we say we have...it's one thing. It all circulates and when you are there you are in the same body of water as Great White Sharks and jellyfish and blue whales and things we don't even know about or can imagine what they are in the deep ocean. That just makes me feel so happy and reminds me why I do what I do in terms of environmental science and makes everything else I go through worth it.

Hannah: *We don't belong in the water, not really. Every dip below the surface requires us to hold our breath and tell our brain, "Don't panic," while we briefly suspend the vital flow of oxygen that powers every cell in our body.*

If you've learned how to swim, you've learned how to turn off an instinctual panic signal, and in return your body will let you exist underwater for one to two minutes at a time. We're actually the only member of the great ape family who can do this; our cousins never bothered learning to doggy paddle, let alone hold their breath and dive down to visit the fish.

Imagine what it might have felt like to be the first human who figured out how to hold your breath and propel yourself forward under the water's surface. Imagine discovering that you could open your eyes and just float there, a temporary visitor in a totally alien world.

That was millions of years ago. Since then each generation of humans who jumps in without fear has had to re-learn this special skill; instinct still warns us away from putting our face under the water.

But even once we learn to control that fear, we're still limited in how far and how long we can travel in water. Stay in too long or run afoul of a current too strong...and the water becomes deadly.

Robyn Hannigan: I was trying to think about a story to tell about water particularly about oceans as I am an ocean scientist. I was thinking back to about 19….78; I was a kid. I was learning how to swim as most kids do growing up on Rhode Island on the coast. I was taking swim lessons in the ocean. There were a lot of rip current things happening. I remember swimming for hours and hours and hours, back and forth along the shore and feeling like my swim skills were pretty good. You know I was eight. Around that time there was a hurricane.

It was Hurricane Gloria coming up the coast and now you can figure out exactly what year it was. And we lived on the coast and everybody was saying you got to evacuate, you got to get away. My brain as an eight year old said, "I can swim in this because I am a great swimmer." So I told my mom that I was going out to the beach and going to watch the storm." She told me, "No." And I told her "Yes, that is what I am going to do." It wasn't unusual for me to go out in the middle of thunderstorms and stand in the rain and watch the storms. And, so my parents, I don't know what they were thinking, said, "Fine. If that's what you want to do. Just don't go in the water." So I went down to the beach. And I watched the storm coming in.

They were huge. And, I thought: "I know how to swim along the coast during calm water. I think I'm going to get in the water and try to get in the water and swim along the coast during the storm because I'm a really, really good swimmer. I'm going to really show them. That I'm going to be like the world's best swimmer. "I'll show them." So I got in the water and I didn't show them. Luckily, nothing bad happened to me other than getting my pants scared off of me. When I realized that I wasn't actually that good a swimmer, I think I got out to about my hips and the current started to pull me under.

I realized that was going to be the end of me if I didn't get out of there. I struggled quite a bit to get back to shore. Fell on the sand and said that I'm not that good of a swimmer. I'm never going to do that again. I went home soaking wet. From that moment on, my love of the ocean has been during the calm weather. Not on a boat because I still like to swim. And during storms, that little part of the eight-year-old me still goes bananas and thinks, "Oh my gosh. I'm going to drown!"

Hannah: *Sometime in the last million years, humans figured out how to overcome the challenge posed by the vast waterways they encountered and they developed a better way to leave the shore behind. The first boats were simple watercraft like dugout canoes and papyrus rafts, but*

each innovation took us further and further away from land. Many archeologists believe the first people to settle in North America actually arrived by boat, crossing over from the Eurasian continent to Alaska some 16,000 years ago and slowly making their way down the Pacific coast over the next few thousand years.

And about a thousand years ago, Vikings used their innovative and iconic ships to sail from Iceland to North America, where they encountered the descendants of the people who'd made their way to our continent so many millennia before.

It's a basic fact of human expansion across the globe that some people just can't resist finding out what's across that ocean or where that river ends.

Frank Willem: For most people that close access to the ocean is...it's hard to describe. I think either the sea is in your or it isn't. And I can go on a freshwater body of water and I can enjoy myself, but it's not the same. Even if I'm on the Back Bay here, I know that's connected to the ocean and the possibilities for where you can travel are limitless. And to me it just changes the whole dynamic.

Hannah: *Even though we've been using small one-person boats for hundreds of thousands of years, the act of floating across the water in a kayak or canoe still inspires wonder and excitement for millions of Americans.*

Pam: I learned to kayak off San Juan Island in the state of Washington. I was attending a week-long program on killer whales. At the time, kayaks were made from fiberglass. I discovered it wasn't a good idea to wear shorts in a fiberglass kayak. Despite that uncomfortable start, I love kayaking! I love gliding along the surface immersed in the sights and sounds of the natural world.

I've had many amazing experiences. I've kayaked in Greenland in October. In some places, the water was forming crystals. I had to dig into the hard crust to propel myself forward. In Alaska, I heard what sounded like an explosion, only to look up and see about a quarter of a mile away, a humpback whale breach. As it hit the water, the air shook from the sound. I've also kayaked at night among phosphorescent plankton. But I think maybe the best experience I've had has been in Maine. Whenever I go out in my kayak, I look for dark brown objects bobbing on the surface. If I'm lucky and the water conditions are right, I can catch a glimpse of one. When I see it, I begin to sing, hoping my voice–so different from the deeper loud voices of a boat's engine–will attract it. Sometimes, as I paddle closer, I laugh at my silliness, especially when I realize as I near the object that instead of it being a harbor seal, I have been serenading a buoy.

At low tide, rocky ledges are exposed. Some of these serve as haul out areas for seals. Recently, I came across one ledge with a group of seals. I tried to stay far enough away I wouldn't spook them, but some–probably the younger ones–nervously slid off their rocky perches into the water. They didn't swim away. Instead, they surrounded me. They rose up until I was able to see their whiskery faces and thick necks. We are both naturally curious creatures.

I floated in my kayak. They bobbed on the water. They'd disappear and resurface at a different spot. This dance went on for a while, as they slowly made their way back to the ledge.

Casco Bay may be near my home in terms of mileage, but the distance that I travel when I go out in my kayak is immeasurable. I am transported to another world. My spirit, no matter how low it has been, is lifted. I feel so lucky to live in Maine.

Hannah: "*Exploration is in our nature. We began as wanderers, and we are wanderers still."*

When he wrote that, Carl Sagan was talking about our journey to the stars, but long before we went to space, we set our sights on artificially adapting our oxygen-dependent bodies to enter a world just as foreign and dangerous to us as the moon.

The first attempts to create diving apparatus began in the 1700s, but early diving suits were extremely dangerous, and many of the first inventors died using their own creations. It wasn't until the 1940s that modern scuba diving gear was created. Since then, we've continued to push the limits of how deep and how long we can go. In case you are wondering, the longest anyone has stayed underwater with only scuba gear was six days.

Christine: So my name is Christine. When I was an undergrad I studied abroad in this program down in the Caribbean. It was a marine ecology program and we had this real cool component where we got to use scuba diving as a learning tool. So one day after dinner we went out to this familiar dive site called the cliff. It was called the cliff not because of this rocky outcropping on the shore but because once you swam out a little ways the sea floor just dropped off straight about 80 feet. So we got to our dive site and we knew it had to do with coral reef ecology but we didn't know the exact purpose of our dive and we suited up, and my instructor passed out the equipment. So it was just this one little piece of yellow plastic that we would wear over our masks and an extra light that turned out to emit blue light.

So we went out and we got to the edge of the wall. It was dark. We only had our little white flash lights to see. We paused there at the edge. I remember looking out off the cliff wall under water and trying to see into the depths as far as I could and just feeling this immense, overwhelming excitement and also sort of a sense of foreboding. It was thrilling being there, like we were breaking the rules. So we went over the edge and descended about 15 feet or so along the wall and my instructor stopped us and had us gather around. She indicated for us to shut off our regular flash lights and turn on our blue lights.

When we did this amazing thing happened. It was like stepping into a Grateful Dead poster. All around us the scene of amazing psychedelic colors just erupted: the corals, the algae, and even some of the critters were fluorescing in the blue light. We were just seeing these neon yellows and greens and blues everywhere. It really was an alien landscape. I've never seen anything like it.

And I remember thinking to myself: "What a ridiculous place to be," and how incredible it was in that moment that we, the ten of us who had come from all around the world, found ourselves 40 feet underwater, in the dark, in the depths, and experiencing this incredible sight that to me just felt like one of those universal secrets that not everyone gets to experience. It was this powerful,

emotional feeling of this connection to the ocean around me and all of things in it. I've always taken that with me and it's something I always feel whenever I go to the ocean.

Hannah: *When I think of diving, I think of a story like Christine's or the ones my parents told me about their diving adventures around the world before I was born...stories that take place in warm, tropical oceans. But here in the US, people don't just dive in the ocean or in the summer. Gary Thompson, owner of Tri-State Diving in Detroit Lakes, Minnesota, doesn't let the weather keep him from taking his customers out into the chilly lakes of Minnesota all year long.*

Gary Thompson: Hello my name is Gary Thompson, owner of Tri-State Diving. Our Detroit Lakes area has some of the best freshwater diving in the world, with the amount of lakes, the clear lakes that we have. So, it makes it an enjoyable time for people to get out, and enjoy a lot of what we have. A lot of fish, different kind of varieties of fish to look at in the lakes. We have a lot of artifacts that we find over the years, everything from old motors to tackle to bones from animals that are prehistoric even. So it's...we have very good diving for this area of the United States for people to see stuff under the water.

People find it weird, as I look out and see the wind blowing 30 miles an hour and it's... temperatures are 30 below, that we would partake in ice diving in the winter time. But our hard water diving, as we call it–diving under the ice–is actually better than the summertime in some ways. We don't have to worry about boat traffic. We don't have to worry about some other things in the summertime. And, visibility, in the summertime, at a given lake, might be 30 feet, or 20 feet. And in the winter time, with the algae died off and no wave action, we can have visibility up to a hundred or 200 feet.

So, it's kinda like diving on the Caribbean, at that point, other than that you have to have a lot more equipment and tents in order to be able to enjoy winter diving.

Hannah: *If the thrill and challenge of scuba diving isn't for you, there are plenty of other ways to experience the excitement of leaving dry land and to overcome the challenges of our otherwise earth-bound bodies….like hitching a swim with a horse.*

Swimming with a Horse in Minnesota:

Storyteller: That Skipper, he was a great horse, and he and I kind of disappeared. It was high water, and his head was up and my head was up, and I had him in the saddle going straight back, and it was the joy of a lifetime going down the river. The current kind of took us, but he kept right on swimming and crossed over.

Interviewer: And it was just your head sticking up?

Storyteller: Oh, yeah, but I had a hold of the saddle, and his head was up and he was swimming, and I was just along for the ride.

Interviewer: Were you on the saddle or were your feet hanging out in back of you?

Storyteller: They were hanging out back.

Interviewer: Oh my gosh. What was that like?

Storyteller: It was fun. It was fun.

Interviewer: If you know you're going to survive it!

Storyteller: If he didn't panic, I wasn't going to! You could do about anything with him.

Hannah: *If that scenario is a bit wild for your taste, you could do as our ancestors must have done and enjoy a simple splash in a puddle or a peaceful float on a log. That's what Kathryn McGrady and her son do whenever they visit their favorite lake.*

Kathryn McGrady and Matthew: We like to go to Hok-Si-La...another neat thing about Hok-Si-La is that when it rains or when it starts flooding, the way it changes the beach it's just fabulous. We went down there, and there is no beach, but we just went swimming anyway. It's just neat because it completely changes the landscape, the water does. You never know what you are going to get when you go back.

Mathew: When I go to Hok-Si-La I like to just sit and float on the logs.

KG: We love the rain too, don't we?

M: We love to just go and jump in the puddles.

Hannah: *Thanks for spending this time with me listening to these stories. If you have your own water story that you would like to add to the Smithsonian collection, you can learn how to record and share it by visiting museumonmainstreet.org/stories. That's museumonmainstreet.org/stories or you can use the free Be Here Stories app to upload a story directly from your phone. That's the Be Here Stories app. In both places, you can hear the full collection of stories from all over America. On the Museum on Main Street website, you can view hundreds of stories contributed to the Stories from Main Street initiative and watch documentaries created by rural youth through Museum on Main Street's Stories: YES project.*

Museum on Main Street is an outreach program of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service that engages small town audiences and brings revitalized attention to underserved rural communities. In partnership with state humanities councils, Museum on Main Street brings traveling exhibitions, educational resources, and programming to small towns across America through their own local museums, historical societies, and other cultural venues.

These exhibitions are designed to engage communities and become a catalyst for conversation about life in small-town America, to start dialogs, build excitement, facilitate connections, and open doors to your community's history, culture, people, and sense of local pride. See a full tour schedule for Museum on Main Street exhibits and learn more about the program at museumonmainstreet.org.

Thank you to our storytellers whose voices can be heard in this episode.

Several of the stories in this episode were recorded by Pamela Ferris Olson as part of the Women Mind the Water project, the Minnesota Humanities Center, and the Water Bar and Public Studio, and the main Museum on Main Street story collection. You can see a full list of story credits, links to all the stories used in this episode, and an episode transcript in the episode description. Thank you to all the Museum on Main Street collaborators who helped collect these stories.

You can see a full list of story credits, links to all the stories used in this episode, and an episode transcript in the episode description.

A special thanks to the MuseWeb team, Nancy Proctor and Heather Shelton, who have been instrumental in gathering and curating stories for Museum on Main Street.

This episode was produced for the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service by Better Lemon Creative Audio. It was produced, written, narrated, and edited by me, Hannah Hethmon. See you next time.

I'm Hannah Hethmon, and you're listening to a special preview of Stories from Main Street: Water/Ways, a new podcast from Museum on Main Street.

Museum on Main Street is a program of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. Since 2016, their Water/Ways exhibition has been traveling all over America, stopping for six weeks at a time in over 100 small towns. A big part of Museum on Main Street's programming involves collecting stories from everyday people about life in small-town America. Over the years, they've collected thousands of stories and anecdotes, and they asked me to curate the best of these stories into a new storytelling podcast. In this first season, we're focusing on water stories.

The water stories you'll hear in this show... they're raw, they're real, and, as such, they're a unique window into America, a country as ever-changing, multi-faceted, and diverse as the waterways that cover our continent.

Join me for this listening experience as we explore these stories and their connections over six episodes that will warm your heart, pique your curiosity, and introduce you to some amazing small-town Americans.