## Kaolin Can Can-Paddle Georgia 2011

June 22 -Oconee River

<u>Distance:</u> 15 miles <u>Starting Elevation: 232 feet</u> Ending Elevation: 206 feet

**Launch Site GPS Coordinates:** Lat: 33 1 53.2776 Lon: -83 11 37.557

<u>Obstacles:</u> There are numerous locations where snags and strainers block the path of the river. In some cases, these may require that you get out of your boat. Allow the boat in front of you to clear the obstacle before attempting to maneuver through the obstacle.

**Restroom Facilities:** Mile 0 Boat Landing Road

Mile 8 Private PropertyMile 15 Avant Mine

## **Points of Interest:**

Mile 1—Sandbars and Pop Tops--The sandbars of a river tell its story. Walk the length of one and you'll know what animals have visited—from four-wheeler tracks to heron prints and you'll know what was eaten—from mussel shells to turtle eggs. You'll also learn the story of our influence on the rivers—the detritus of our lives ends up here as well (shoes, car parts, coolers, etc.). On the sandbars immediately below Milledgeville are an inordinate amount of beverage can tops—most dating back to the 1960s and 70s—and in them is a true American story—one of triumph, tragedy and good, ole American know-how. Until the early 1960s, most beer and soft drinks consumed in U.S. were drunk from bottles, but when Ermal Fraze, a tool and diemaker from Dayton, Ohio found himself at a picnic without a can opener to pop his beer, he set out to make a better drink can. The result was the pop top beer can. It was first introduced by Iron City Beer in 1962. Iron City's sales jumped 233 percent and soon the big beer makers followed suit. In 1969 canned beer outsold bottled beer for the first time, but soon those pop tops became a solid waste nightmare. They inspired a line in Jimmy Buffet's "Margaritaville" and became a symbol of American excess, careless waste and litter. People called for a change, and the beverage industry responded, introducing "sta-tabs" in 1975. As one newspaper quipped: "Environmentalists won't have the pull tab to kick around anymore." The can tops that remain have been in the river for at least 35 years. While the aluminum can bodies have long since been eroded by the river, the sturdier, more resistant aluminum tops remain. You'll often find the beer brand imprinted in these tops. Take a look around and see what stories you can find.

Mile 3—Rock Landing—About a quarter mile below Buck Creek on river left above the first major bend in the river downstream from the launch site, is the site of Rock Landing. This was the main crossing point of the Oconee river during the 1700s and early 1800s. In 1777, William Bartram crossed the river here and visited the nearby Indian site of Old Oconee Town—which at that date had been deserted more than 70 years. Three Indian trails converged here on the west side - Ocmulgee Old Towns Trail, Cussetah Path and the Old Trading Path to Augusta. As white settlers moved into the area, it became the site of a ferry.

Mille 7—Strainer & Snags/Lumber Rafts—At this bend you will find the first problematic snag downstream from Milledgeville. Depending on water levels it may be necessary to pull your boat around the snag on the sandbar. While you are doing this, ponder this note from history: in the 1800s (and into the early 1900s), this river was literally full of log rafts on their way to sawmills on the Georgia coast at the mouth of the Altamaha in Darien. Dwellers along the Oconee and Ocmulgee rivers spent their spring and summer seasons tending crops, but come late fall and winter, they turned their attention to the vast forests of Middle Georgia, felling trees, building rafts and floating these log rafts downstream to Darien. The rafting season coincided with the high water season and usually peaked in December, shortly before Christmas—a way for rafters to get spending money and their Christmas whiskey. That said, the Darien Gazette newspaper of 1902 reported of the lumbermen, they are "as orderly a set of laborers as we ever saw." The logs were sometimes stranded for months at a time waiting for the next freshet and the dry spells rippled through the state's economy (just as droughts affect us today). Said one Darien resident during an especially bad drought: "Several of us almost decided to ask the government to request special prayers in all the churches for rain." Of course, during Georgia's most recent drought, then Gov. Sonny Perdue did just that, holding a prayer vigil for rain at the Capitol.

Mile 9—Strainer & Snag—Just downstream of a small home overlooking the river on a high bluff, you'll find another cross river snag. You should be able to stay in your boat to get through this one.

Mile 12—Oxbow Lake—The first of four oxbow lakes in the next three miles of river. While this one is obvious from the river, the others will be less so. Keep your eyes peeled for signs of them and try your luck at locating them. In some cases, a walk to the top of a riverside sandbar and between stands of willow will reveal large lakes hidden in the floodplain forest. This particular oxbow was created within the last 30 years. 1980 aerial photographs show it as still being part of the river. Oxbows are created when the river eliminates a bend or loop in the river as it cuts a more direct path to the sea.

Mile 14—Oxbow Lake—You'll know you've reached this oxbow when you come to a solitary tree on a slim island in the middle of the river. The oxbow is on river right and you can paddle into the "lake" that it still connected to the river. Follow the old river channel around and you will eventually arrive at a large sandbar that stretches the length of the upstream side of the oxbow. It's an impressive, flat bar the length of two football fields. The tree in the river's main channel suggests that this was a recent cut, and one local fisherman told us the cut was made during flooding in 2009.

Mile 14.5—Water & Energy—Just downstream of the above mentioned oxbow would be a water intake for a controversial proposed coal-fired power plant to be built on the eastern slope of Washington County in the Ogeechee River basin. Coal-fired and nuclear power plants need water to operate—and lots of it. Georgia's energy sector is the largest single user of water in the state. The proposed Plant Washington being advanced by a consortium of Electric Membership Corporations would take up to 16 million gallons of water from the Oconee each day. Less than 10 percent of the water would be returned due to the interbasin water transfer from the Oconee to the Ogeechee basin and because of consumptive losses in the power generating process. A loss of 14 million gallons out of the Oconee would be the equivalent of removing seven percent of the river during a summer drought, imagine today's paddle with 7% less water. Proponents of the plant claim the Oconee can meet the needs of the new coal-fired plant 93 percent of the time. The proposed plant illustrates forces now at work in South Georgia where underground aquifers and plentiful rivers are attracting multiple proposals for new power plants (residents are also fighting a plant in Early County on the Chattahoochee River and a one in Ben Hill County near the Ocmulgee River). Aside from demanding large quantities of water, coal-fired power plants are problematic for South Georgia because the area's blackwater streams are more acidic. Mercury from coal burned at power plants goes into the air and then falls into these blackwater creeks, where the high acid levels convert it to methyl mercury—a toxin that readily works its way into the food chain, making fish caught from these streams unhealthy to eat.. Thus, if you want to keep water in our rivers and mercury out of our fish, turn off your lights at home (and your AC, if you dare). Conserving energy means conserving water.

Mile 15—Avant Mine & Kaolin—Our take out for the day is the Avant Mine, a kaolin mine operated by Thiele Corp. Thiele is a member of the China Clay Producers Association of Georgia—long-time sponsors of Paddle Georgia. Kaolin is considered one of Georgia's largest natural resources. Some eight million metric tons are mined in the state each year with a value of \$1 billion—and it's all found at the edge of the fall line in the Coastal Plain. That's because millions of years ago this spot was once the edge of the sea. Ancestral rivers of the Oconee brought millions of tons of sediment down from the Piedmont and Blue Ridge and deposited it here in deltas and coastal marshes. And…100 million years later we're digging it up and using it to coat paper, make toilets, paint and even drugs. You'll find a river bank full of the clay just upstream from our take out location.