

Missouri Rafter – A Vignette

Big Joe Brandon ran the last screw down tight with the cordless screw shooter. The project was complete. “Let it rain or shake all it wants’ to, now.” Joe said as he put up his tools.

He had no sooner put everything away and brought a cup of coffee out onto the new, massive deck than two of his young friends stopped in to check on him. They had started out as two of his children’s friends that had found Joe fascinating to be around, and had become friends with him on their own right.

“Hey, Blue, Tony. What are you two up to? No good, or I miss my guess. You know where the coffee is.”

Both young men helped themselves to Joe’s near bottomless pot of coffee and came back out on the deck. Blue took a seat on the bench seat built around the perimeter of the deck and Tony sat down across the wrought iron table from Joe.

“See you got it done,” Blue, said, looking around the roofed deck. It was disproportionately large, considering the small size of Joe’s house.

“Yep. Thanks to you two. You’ve both got a spot, if things get bad. You know that, I hope.”

“Sure, Mr. Brandon. And thanks. Didn’t really do that much,” Blue replied.

“Couldn’t have handled those billets of flotation foam without damaging them, without your guys’ help.”

Tony looked over to where Joe’s custom sixteen foot Jon boat was tied off to the railing of the deck. It was wider than most Jon boats that length and had two twenty-horsepower Mercury outboards to power it. There was a small console on one side amidships for the steering wheel and instruments. “See you moved the boat. And have a boat anchor down for the deck.”

Joe grinned. “Yep. All ready to go. The water comes up, up she goes with the water, or stays up if the ground liquefies.”

“When do you think, Mr. Brandon?” Blue asked.

“No way of really telling. But I think soon. The way they’ve been raising and reinforcing the levees since Katrina, the next major flood is going to turn into... should I say it? Megaflood. The same amounts, plus some, in my opinion, is getting channeled into smaller and smaller areas with the levees. When those levees break, and they will, naturally or with some help, it’s going to be worse than the ’27, ’37, and ’93 floods. By a factor of at least five. In my opinion, of course. You know the county FEMA director doesn’t like me spreading my opinions around, so keep it to yourselves.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Brandon. We both need to get back to work. Congrats on your deck. It’s sweet.”

“You sure it will hold my three hundred pounds if I come?” Blue asked, finishing the coffee in his cup and putting it on the table besides Tony’s.

“It’ll hold. You know what’s under it.”

“Bye, Mr. Brandon,” Tony said. Blue waved as they walked over to Blue’s massive Ford four-wheel-drive crew-cab dually pickup truck. It had a six-inch lift, and enough bumper guards and the like to armor a tank.

Joe shook his head and took the boy’s cups into his tiny kitchen to rinse them out. He decided to lay down for a bit. That work had tasked him more than he would admit.

When he woke, Joe checked the cable news, the internet forums he was affiliated with, and then spent some time on the Amateur Radio bands, checking in with the local two-meter club. Satisfied that nothing un-toward had happened while he was asleep, Joe decided to add a few things to the deck from the house. “Be my luck to float off without a bug-out-bag or nothing,” he muttered.

What he moved was far more than a BOB. There were several twenty-four gallon Rubbermaid ActionPacker totes with equipment and supplies for an emergency. A couple of wheeled Coleman Twenty-five gallon X-treme coolers would take last minute fresh foods and frozen drinking water bottles to keep them that way.

Not even Joe was predicting the rains to start the next day. But... It was only showers.

Three weeks later the area between the Mississippi River and the St. Francis River, including the Little River Drainage District, was water soaked. Both rivers and all the huge ditches of the Little River Drainage District were full to the brim, and then some.

Had the rain stopped then, things would have been fine. Very wet, but fine. No major damage. But the rains didn’t stop. They intensified. Dramatically. A day or so after one large stormy rain front went through, another would be getting close.

It was more than even a few of the newer, reinforced and heightened levees could take. And none of the levees could take the explosives used on them to divert the river on the side away from those that used the explosives.

Joe turned out to be right. It was worse than the floods years earlier. Much worse. When the water got over the street on which Joe lived, he moved a few more things to the deck, and pulled the pins that held the deck in place on its foundation. There was no movement, but Joe could see the water rising on the heavy beams that made up the base of the deck.

Walking to the far end of the thirty-foot long deck, Joe checked his Jon boat. It was still on the trailer, but it was trying to lift. Another foot and water would be in his house. Another two feet and it would be in his neighbors' houses. Including those that had evacuated early. There was a call out now for further evacuations, but on Joe's street, at least, it wasn't happening.

Joe had to smile at some of the calls he was hearing on the police scanner and the CB. People were beginning to panic, even where the water was only a few inches deep. The Amateur Radio Operators he was talking to were all in pretty good positions. Six of the twenty-one in their group had left early on. The rest, besides Joe, were out of the immediate danger area. Only Joe had chosen to stay and sit out the flood.

The next time Joe looked water was two inches higher than the floor in his house. Nothing to do. He'd already moved everything to the highest points possible with Blue's and Tony's help. They were out now helping other people.

Suddenly Joe felt the deck move. It was now afloat. By only an inch or so, but the water was still rising quickly. He looked up at the sound of a yell. It was Blue and Tony in Blue's truck. There were half a dozen people in the bed, many clutching suitcases and garbage bags of belongings.

"You doing okay, Mr. Brandon?" Blue yelled over.

"Just like my plan!" Joe yelled back, holding up his right hand, thumb up.

"This is the last trip in the truck," Blue said, not quite as loudly. "We're going to go get my boat. There's a bunch over on the ditch didn't get out. We'll be back for them. You call if you need help."

Joe waved and nodded. He wasn't one to wait on others. It took only minutes to transfer to the Jon boat and fire up the twin twenty-horsepower Mercury engines. He backed the boat carefully away from the trailer it was floating above, and then moved it out into the street. He looked back at his house on its corner lot. The deck was rising slowly at the rear of the house.

Against the light current of the raising water, Joe headed for the streets on either side of the large drainage ditch that split the town into two sections. The water in the ditch was running with a strong current.

Moving along side each house in turn on one street, and then the other, Joe moved stranded people from their homes to the remaining dry land in the area. That small patch was becoming smaller by the minute. The refugees were being helicoptered out as fast as they came in.

"Going to lose a lot of equipment," Joe told the national guardsman helping people out of the Jon boat. "Bridge over Polecat Ditch just went."

“Nuts!” said the guardsman. “I need to report this!” The last person out of his boat, Joe backed it away from the new, temporary shore, and headed back into the fray of recovering those that waited too long to leave.

He joined up with Blue and Tony in Blue’s runabout. They couldn’t go in the shallower waters that Joe could, so each boat worked the areas they were best suited. Joe could tell Tony and Blue would prefer that he would evacuate with the others, but he was, he knew very well, too stubborn to do it. Even at seventy-three, he was determined to go with the plan he’d been working on for years.

But Joe did have limits. He headed home well before it got dark. And when it got dark, it got really dark. With the cloud cover and continuing rain, and no power, the night became primordial. Until Joe fired up a Coleman lantern. Fortunately there was a breeze blowing that kept the mosquitoes and other insects at bay. It didn’t do much for the other various critters that, like the people, were in the process of losing their homes.

Joe kept a short frog gig handy to chase off the animals that tried to get out of the water and onto the deck. Dogs and cats with collars, he let come aboard, even giving them some water. Those without collars he kept off the deck, with some regret. He just couldn’t take every animal on board what was now a raft and the only flat dry spot around, except for roofs. And there weren’t many of those left.

As the water rose, so did the strength of the currents. Houses were starting to float off their foundations and were being swept away by the current, with some being knocked down by debris in the water, including other houses.

It was something that Joe couldn’t control and was a real danger for him. The current took his home, and the house upstream, and then the one downstream. The debris load was getting heavier and Joe had to fend off things drifting into the raft much of the night.

The stout vertical posts with heavy metal rings around them connected to the deck kept it in place, but Joe was beginning to worry about the posts giving way and setting him adrift. His anchor might not hold in this current. But when morning came, the deck was still floating, now on top of fifteen feet of water. Joe looked around the area. There was very little to see but debris filled water. No houses or other man-made structures except for the occasional power pole that had survived. There were the tops of some trees, almost every one of which was carrying a load of animals.

Joe was eating breakfast when Blue and Tony came up in Blue’s boat. “Looks like you picked up a few passengers,” Tony said, nodding at the dogs and cats all hunkered down together like family at one end of the deck.

“Yep. Take’em off to a shelter, will you? They’re beginning to annoy me.”

“We came to get you, Mr. Brandon. Time to get you to dry land.”

“No can do, boys,” Joe said. “You know good and well I’m not leaving my stuff behind to the waters or to looters.” Suddenly Joe was pointing a stainless steel short barreled Snake Charmer .410 shotgun just off to one side of Blue’s boat. Joe pulled the trigger and Blue and Tony jumped.

“Another one,” Joe said casually, reloading the Snake Charmer. “That’s seventeen, so far.”

Tony and Blue watched the dead Cottonmouth snake float away and then looked back at Joe. “Dogs been waking me up all night when one got too close for comfort. Speaking of which, let me help you load them up in your boat.”

“Come on, Mr. Brandon. Go with us,” Blue pleaded, grabbing the first dog Joe walked over to the boat and helped over the side.

Giving it up as hopeless, Tony and Blue loaded up all the cats and dogs and headed for the nearest shoreline. “We’ll be back, Mr. Brandon.”

The two young men were good as their word. When they showed up the water had dropped by two feet and a boat full of media types were interviewing crusty old Joe Brandon. As they’d come up, Blue and Tony had heard at least three shots, all from the Snake Charmer.

Blue pointed to another dead Cottonmouth drifting with the current as he edged the boat up to the raft. “Come on, Mr. Brandon. Your turn.”

“Nope. Got too much to lose here. The water is going down. Be down back in its banks in a week. Got enough supplies here to last twice that. Got some more dogs for you, though.”

Joe had totally ignored the reporters when Blue and Tony came up. He transferred the dogs to their boat, took his seat again and looked at the boat full of reporters and camera people. “Oh, Yeah. You were asking?”

“Why the raft, Mr. Brandon? What prompted you to build a raft in your back yard?” asked one of the reporters and then thrust a microphone toward Joe.

“Didn’t. Built a deck on the back of my house. It became a raft when the area flooded. Convenient, huh?”

“I think it was more than sheer convenience,” said another of the media personnel. “From what we’ve been told, you planned this from the start.”

“Get a clue, lady,” responded Joe, grinning. “Even as good as I am, I can’t plan floods. They sort of just happen as God sees fit.”

“That’s not what I meant,” said the woman as most of the other media personnel laughed.

“Nah. I know that. Just ribbing you a little.” Joe got up from where he was sitting on one of the bench seats around the deck and went over to the table bolted to the deck. He picked up a percolator and poured himself another cup of coffee before going back to the bench. “Any of you want coffee? Pretty good brew, if I do say so myself. These fine young, helpful gentlemen can attest to that.” Joe nodded toward Tony and Blue, still keeping their boat close.

“It is good coffee,” Blue said.

Everyone in the other boat declined, despite Blue’s words. So Joe continued, “Sure I planned on the deck floating when it flooded or when the big quake comes. Baring I’m sittin’ on a sand blow or crevasse, should be just fine when the ground liquefies.”

“So you knew this flood was coming?” asked one of the reporters.

“Well, yeah! Being the student of history I am, all it took to figure out a big flood was coming was to look at the levees and the weather patterns. Too much water in too little space and you’ve got a flood.”

Blue and Tony knew Big Joe fairly well. Both saw the way he was watching the reporters when he made his next statement. “And, again, history teaches us, that during floods involving levees, some human being will invariably knock down or dynamite said levee to protect his property at the expense of others.”

There was murmuring among those on the other boat. One, looking to be the eldest of the bunch asked, “Sir, are you saying that someone blew one of the levees?”

“I’m not saying anything of the sort. Not exactly. But iffin’ it was me in that boat, I’d be finding me another boat, and ask a few people with the most to gain for the flood to come this way, rather than the other way. Might get some interesting answers. You can tell them Big Joe sent you.”

“Is that what they call you? Big Joe?”

“Some do. Back in the day I sort of had the reputation as being an eccentric. A bit bigger than life, some of them said. Never really thought so, myself.”

Blue and Tony saw the Cottonmouth coming up over the back of the runabout and started to shout a warning, but Joe beat them too it. “Might want to knock that there Cottonmouth snake off your boat so’s I can get a shot at it.”

There were screams and scrambling in the boat. Overloaded as it was, it didn’t take much for it to tip and dump all but one person in the water. There were more screams as those in the water scrambled to get away from the snake. Most opted to head for the deck, since its surface was lower to the water than the side of the boat.

Joe took the time to shoot the snake before it could bite anyone, and then helped people get onto the raft. He began handing out blankets from one of the totes fastened securely to the deck's floor.

"Hey, Joe!" Blue called.

When Joe turned around he saw where Blue was pointing. There were two more Cottonmouths headed for the boat and the raft.

A very scared young woman asked Joe, "Aren't you going to shoot them?"

"Only if I think they'll cause trouble. And... Yep... They got a head of steam up and are probably as upset as you'll see one." Casually Joe lifted the Snake Charmer up and out at arms length, sighting down the barrel. He waited for a moment before he squeezed the trigger.

Both snakes stopped swimming and began drifting with the current. Most of those on the raft with Joe had begun backing away from the edge where the snakes were approaching. After the shot they moved back to stand around the table on the deck. "I could use some of that coffee, now," said one of them.

"Sure." As Joe took cups from another tote the sound of rain hitting the roof of the deck made most of the people look up. Thunder sounded and lightning flashed. "You boys better head for dry land with them dogs," Joe told Blue and Tony.

The two exchanged a look and then Blue fired up the big twin engines on his runabout and took off at high speed.

"And you," Joe said to the lone cameraperson in the other boat, should come on board. I have static discharge rods on the roof so we shouldn't have to worry about lightning. You, on the other hand, are a sitting duck."

The man put down his camera and grabbed a paddle from its storage rack on one side of the boat. He made a few strokes and then transferred from the boat to the deck, with the camera.

With the long step he took from the boat to the deck, the cameraman almost went into the water, but Joe grabbed him and got him on board, with the camera intact. But the movement sent the boat sharply backward, away from the deck.

"Uh, Biscuit?" Joe said, calling the boat owners name, "You might want to swim out and get your boat."

"What! For crying out loud! Didn't one of you tie the boat off when I nosed in to the raft?"

There were looks all around, but no one said anything. "Well, I ain't swimming after it," Biscuit said. "You guys just going to have to pitch in and buy me a new boat."

While the group of media people were arguing with Biscuit, Joe slipped into a raincoat, got into his Jon boat, untied it from the deck, and went after the rapidly disappearing runabout. He came back a few minutes later and tossed the painter to Biscuit. "You might want to tie it up yourself."

"Yeah." But Biscuit didn't tie the boat. He went over the railing of the deck and stepped into the boat. "You bunch of idiots nearly cost me my boat. You're on your own!" Biscuit started the engine on the runabout and took off in the heavy rain.

They didn't like it much, but there wasn't much to be done about it, except to take a seat, huddle under a blanket, and accept Joe's renewed offer of coffee, tea, hot chocolate, and snacks. Joe got on the radio and let the authorities know where the media were and asked for a boat to pick them up.

Joe had to grin when he was patched through to Tony on his cell phone. "Got some human passengers for you this time," he told Tony. "I think you know how to find us."

Tony was laughing when he closed his phone. In rain suits now, the two headed back to the sunken town in the heavy rain. It took almost an hour for them to work their way through the obstacle course the area had become as the water continued to drain away faster than the rain could raise it. It wouldn't be long before only shallow draft boats like Joe's would be able to navigate the flood waters.

Blue and Tony could only shake their heads as they idled up to the deck. It seemed Joe was holding audience. There was a burst of laughter, and then another, as Joe entertained the group with the telling of some of his most notable escapades.

"Ah," he said when he saw the boat, "Your transportation is here."

It was with some reluctance that the group of media left Joe's deck, an island in the middle of what was still a huge lake, to take seats in the runabout.

"Any chance you're going this time?" Blue asked Joe.

"You know better. Now you'd better skedaddle. You'll be hard pressed to make it without bottoming out. The water is going down fast."

Blue and Tony were pummeled with questions about Joe on the trip back to the nearest dry land. While maintaining his privacy, they were happy to corroborate the things Joe had told them, and add a few more lines to the Legend of Big Joe Brandon, now commonly known as the 'Missouri Rafter'.

End *****

Copyright 2008
Jerry D Young