

A person in a blue shirt and orange life vest is kayaking on a river. The river is surrounded by dense green trees and foliage. The water is calm and reflects the surrounding greenery. The kayaker is in the middle ground, moving towards the right. The background is a thick forest of tall trees with vibrant green leaves.

BLUE WATER TRAILS

the TUG FORK *of the Big Sandy River*

Paddling the eastern borderlands in search of big fish and rich history

By Lee McClellan



OBIE WILLIAMS PHOTO

THE VIOLENT COLLISIONS between Earth's tectonic plates and the resulting uplifts that formed the southern Appalachians in Kentucky find their most stark and dramatic relief in easternmost Pike County. The nearly vertical mountains and narrow valleys provide vistas as arresting as any in the state.

The Tug Fork of Big Sandy River, which forms part of the boundary between Kentucky and West Virginia, flows through this maze of steep ridges. The Tug carries in its waters healthy smallmouth bass, large flathead catfish and the detritus of long-term human habitation of the valley. The ruggedness of the Tug Fork Valley rubbed off on its settlers; this is a land of notorious family feuds, rugged individualism and labor conflicts.

It's fitting that even the name of the river derives from the toughness of its people. In the winter of 1756, early in the French and Indian War, a group of Virginia soldiers returning home followed the North Fork of "Sandy Creek." Their stomachs empty for days, they boiled, then ate the leather straps, or "tugs," that they used to tie gear to their packs. They also drank the "tug" soup in an effort to avoid starvation.

Afterward, soldiers began calling the river Tug Fork.

The river wears a long history of human exploitation of the valley's timber and coal resources. It is scarred, but not defeated, and in the process of healing. Water quality in the Tug Fork has dramatically improved during the past few decades. It now supports a population of smallmouth bass that rivals

The first riffle downstream of the Hatfield-McCoy Park is the longest of the float.

any found in Kentucky.

"The smallmouth bass in the Tug Fork are one of its most popular fish and doing very well," said Kevin Frey, Eastern Fisheries District biologist for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. "The fishery continues to improve from the late 1980s."

Fisheries crews used to find 10-15 smallmouth bass per hour while doing very population sampling there. "Now, we average 50 fish per hour," Frey said. "The size distribution is really good. We have smallmouths in the 21- to 22-inch range on the larger end. We have plenty of 3- to 4-pound fish to go after."

Muskellunge will be another top shelf predator for Tug Fork anglers to pursue in the coming years due to a joint stocking effort between the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources and Kentucky Fish and Wildlife.

Dave Dreves, assistant director of fisheries for Kentucky Fish and Wildlife, said the department stocked 100 muskellunge measuring 13 inches in May 2017, along with 25,000 muskie fry at Hatfield-McCoy Park in McCarr. A similar stocking occurred at Burnwell while the river near South Williamson received 190 of the larger muskellunge, along with 52,300 fry.

"This year, in late summer, we are going to stock

9-inch muskellunge in partnership with West Virginia. Each state will contribute 195 fish," Dreves said. "We intend to keep doing this through 2021."

WATER FLOW MATTERS

Two floats showcase the history and beauty of the Tug Fork Valley. One is a short but productive journey through the heart of the Hatfield-McCoy feud country. The other is a longer voyage featuring excellent scenery and smallmouth bass fishing.

Paddlers must consult the weather forecast before heading out. Runoff from the steep mountains of the headwaters can turn the normally placid river into a muddy, foamy froth in a matter of hours.

"You'll do better if the Tug is clear, so you can pinpoint where to cast and fish," Frey said.

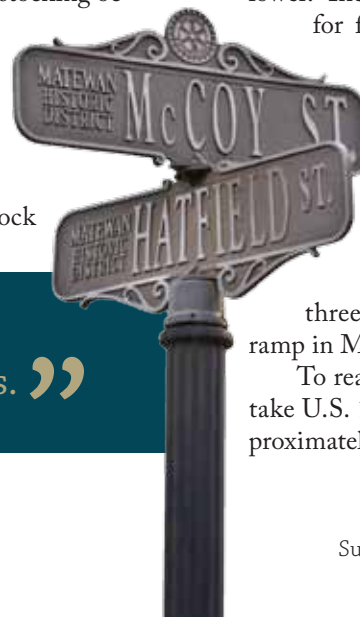
Finding the flow's sweet spot for productive fishing and enjoyable floating is the key for paddling the Tug. Go online to the Williamson gauge on the United States Geological Survey streamflow webpage to find the latest information. Flows of 200 to 700 cfs (cubic feet a second) offer the best conditions for paddling and fishing. Paddlers will likely need to walk their boats over drops and shallow shoals if flows are

lower. The Tug's mild drops are perfect for families, beginners and intermediate paddlers.

HATFIELD-MCCOY PARK TO MATEWAN

The first float begins at the Hatfield-McCoy Park in the McCarr community in Pike County. It ends about three miles downstream at a public ramp in Matewan, West Virginia.

To reach the Hatfield-McCoy Park, take U.S. 119 east from Pikeville for approximately 23 miles. Turn right onto



“ This is a land of notorious family feuds, rugged individualism and labor conflicts. ”



OBIE WILLIAMS PHOTO

KY 319 for 7 miles then left (east) on KY 1056 for 3 miles. The parking lot for the launch lies just after the playground and paved walking path at Hatfield-McCoy Park.

Paddlers will need to leave a shuttle vehicle at the take-out, located across the state line and a few miles away. To reach the take-out, take KY 1056 across the Tug into West Virginia. After 1 mile, turn left onto WV 49 at the T-intersection. After 2 miles, look for a tennis court and playground on the left. A road beside the tennis court leads you to the take out.

The route to the put-in is steeped with the history of the Hatfield-McCoy feud, a murderous conflict between two families that lasted nearly three decades.

The drive, followed by the float down the river, touches many significant sites of America's most notorious feud. A little history helps paddlers understand the underpinnings of the conflict along the way.

Driving on KY 319 brings travelers through the coal town of Hardy. On

its southern fringes awaits the site of the Randolph McCoy Cabin. Here, an attack by nine members of the Hatfield family on Jan. 1, 1888, resulted in the deaths of two of Randolph McCoy's children. The attack also severely injured McCoy's wife, Sally.

Just down from the junction of KY 319 and KY 1056 stands the cabin of the Rev. Anderson "Preacher Anse" Hatfield, who served as a justice of the peace. This is the site of the Hog Trial, in which Randall McCoy accused Floyd Hatfield of stealing a hog. McCoy's loss at the trial intensified the feud between the families.

Also near the cabin is the site of the "Election Day Fight" in early August 1882. Tolbert McCoy jumped Elias Hatfield, the brother of "Preacher Anse" Hatfield, over \$1.75 owed Tolbert from the sale of a fiddle. Family member Ellison Hatfield joined the fight. Tolbert, along with two of his brothers, stabbed Ellison 26 times then shot him for good measure. Ellison died two days later, leading to the famous "Paw Paw Incident" in which the McCoy brothers were

The Matewan floodwall illustrates significant events in the town's history.

tied to trees and shot.

After putting in at Hatfield-McCoy Park, this short float gives anglers time to paddle upstream past the old railroad bridge and fish the long hole back to the launch. Anglers should fish the rocky mouth of Blackberry Creek with a 3-inch, electric blue swimbait. This imitates some of the native shiners that smallmouth bass favor.

Local anglers say this hole holds flathead catfish topping 20 pounds. "The catfish in the Tug are phenomenal, both channel and flathead catfish," Frey said. "When we electroshock the river during population sampling, the channels are so thick you could practically walk across the river on them. There are plenty of numbers of channels from 16 to 24 inches, prime eating size."

Target flatheads in rocky areas with live bait such as shiners, bluegill and green sunfish on a slip-sinker rig. Anglers have good motivation to try this kind of fishing. "We

regularly see flatheads above 30 pounds, and up to 45 pounds or so,” Frey said.

Good smallmouth bass fishing begins at the first drop downstream of the launch. Cast a beaver-style creature bait in hues of green pumpkin and blue in the flowing water just above the drop. A 1/8-ounce, green pumpkin or black skirted double-tailed grub also works well here.

Paddlers negotiating the braided water just downstream of the launch should take the chute on river left. What follows are a series of mild riffles bordered by water willows that hold smallmouth bass. This is a good place to work a black, 4-inch finesse worm rigged on a 1/8-ounce jig. Black is a productive color for smallmouth bass in summer and fall.

The Tug next flows over a long shoal before taking a hard left. Shoals like this are good spots to work medium-running, crawfish-colored crankbaits.

Paddlers soon will see the Matewan floodwall in the distance. The wall features murals of the Hatfield-McCoy feud, the Battle of Matewan labor dispute and mountain scenes.

The flat on the left of the bend is the site of the Paw-Paw Incident. After Ellison Hatfield’s murder by three McCoy brothers, a posse lead by “Devil Anse” Hatfield, the cousin of “Preacher Anse” Hatfield, captured the trio. They tied the McCoy brothers to the bankside paw paw trees and shot them.

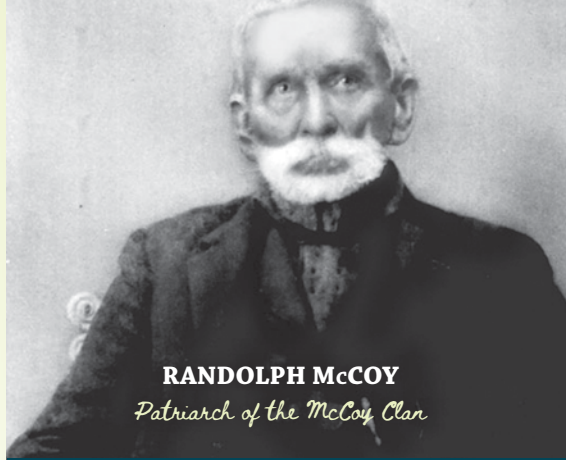
The bank below this area is a good place for anglers to beach their boats and fish. Work the current above and below the rapids at the floodwall with an electric blue swimbait for smallmouth bass.

The Tug deepens with a rocky bank on river right after flowing underneath the KY 1056 bridge. “This stretch of river is known for big flathead catfish,” Frey said. “There are also some big channel cats through there as well.”

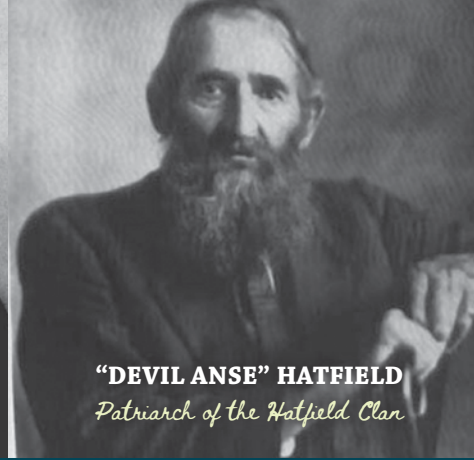
At the end of the deep hole, the river constricts and flows over a riffle before disappearing around a hard right bend. The drop downstream of the bend offers some of the best smallmouth bass water on this float.

Creature baits fished along current seams draw strikes here. This is also a good place to fish a swimbait. It’s worth it to pull over and wade fish here.

The Tug then flows through deeper water that holds flathead catfish. Target the



RANDOLPH MCCOY
Patriarch of the McCoy Clan



“DEVIL ANSE” HATFIELD
Patriarch of the Hatfield Clan

PHOTOS COURTESY WWW.TOURPIKECOUNTY.COM

VOLATILE COUNTRY

The dramatic events that unfolded during the Hatfield and McCoy feud have become part of Kentucky’s lush historical tapestry. Landmarks highlighting violent confrontations between the two families are scattered throughout eastern Pike County. Many are open to the public.



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FEUD DESTINATIONS

(Above) The Randolph McCoy cabin, and site of the famous hog trial, can be accessed off of KY 319, just before its intersection with KY 1056. (Below) The site of the Paw Paw Incident, where the lives of three McCos were taken by a posse led by “Devil Anse” Hatfield, is now a public park in Buskirk, Kentucky. It can be accessed via KY 1056 between McCarr, Kentucky and Matewan, West Virginia, and can also be seen while floating the Tug Fork (see map for exact location).




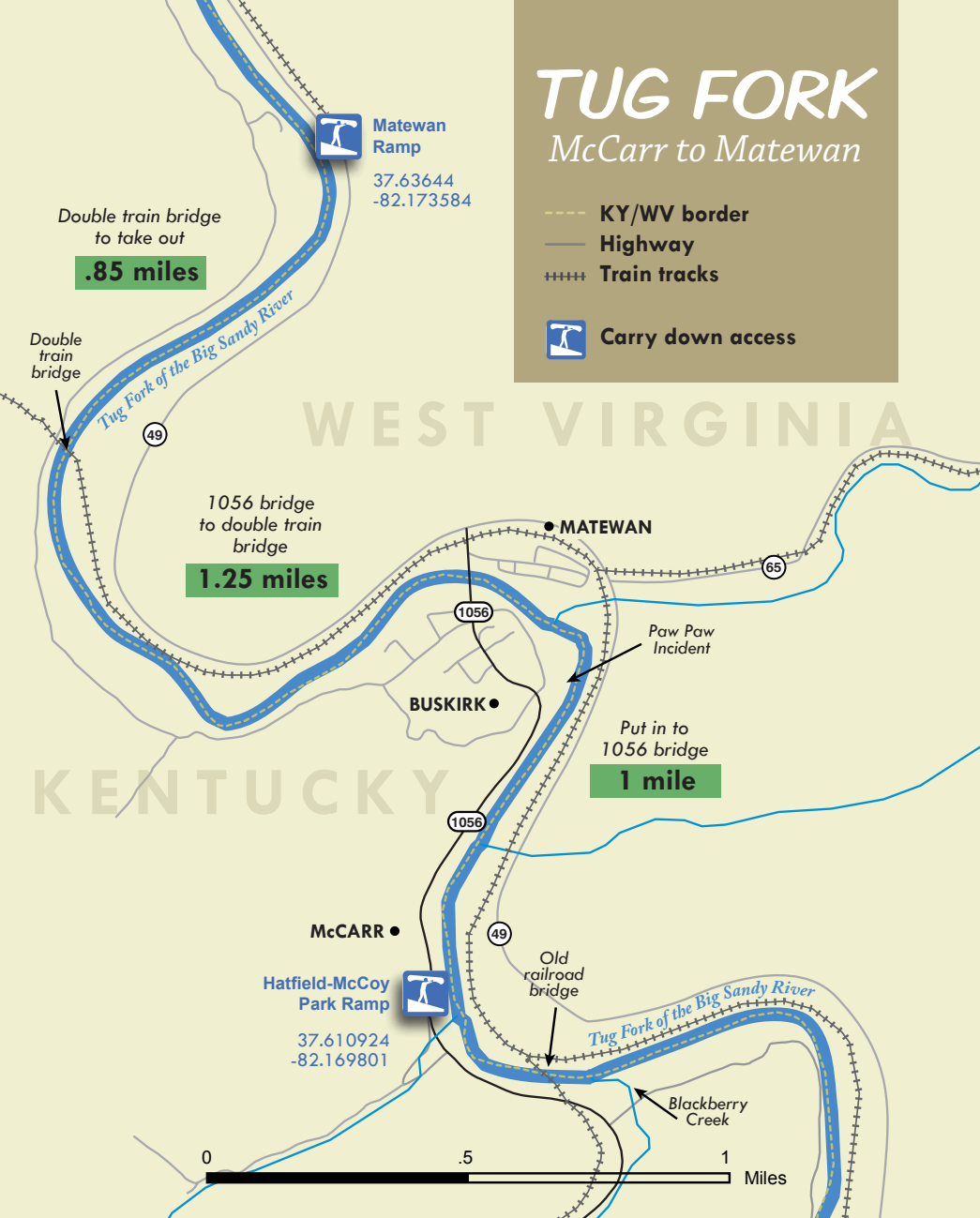
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TUG FORK

McCarr to Matewan

- KY/WV border
- Highway
- ++++ Train tracks

 Carry down access



OBIE WILLIAMS PHOTO

the scenery and paddling through the many long, tranquil deep holes in this stretch of water.

The first bend downstream of the Matewan access features gravel bars and flowing shoals that hold smallmouth bass. This bend forms a horseshoe, with opportunities for anglers to beach their boats and thoroughly fish the gravel bars with a green pumpkin, $\frac{3}{16}$ -ounce, double-tailed skirted grub, or an electric blue swimbait.

Paddlers next encounter a straight stretch of medium-depth water. Paddlers will pass under a golf course bridge and a railroad bridge. After a third bridge, the Tug bends left and into the float's best smallmouth bass water. Anglers should pound gravel bars downstream of the bend with their skirted grub.

The Tug takes a hard right and flows over a deep, aquamarine hole. A long gravel bar lies on river left. This is Burnwell Beach.

Aside from stopping to admire its arresting mountain views, the beach is a good place to pull over and wade the shallower, flowing shoal to cast for hefty smallmouth bass.

Shoals and stream drops grow infrequent downstream of Burnwell Beach as the river transitions to long holes and tranquil waters. Anglers should paddle through this section until the river bends hard left and braids.

rocky areas and woody cover for these rugged fighters.

Soon, paddlers will see the double bridge of the Norfolk Southern Railroad. The Tug constricts and increases its velocity here. The substrate also grows rocky: prime smallmouth bass habitat.

"The area around the railroad bridge is known for rock bass and big smallmouth bass," Frey said.

Wade fish the rock bar downstream of the bridge thoroughly. Drift a black finesse worm in the current, letting it gently touch the bottom occasionally.

The river then bends gently left and flows over two small drops that hold smallmouth bass. It soon gains depth with some rocky banks on the outside bend, prime flat-

head catfish territory.

The take-out on river right is easy to miss. Watch out for broken glass around the access.

MATEWAN TO WILLIAMSON/SOUTH WILLIAMSON

The second float begins at the Matewan access. Paddlers can end their trip after 10 miles at Williamson, West Virginia, or go another 2 miles to the concrete boat ramp in South Williamson, Kentucky. Paddlers should be on the water early and prepared to leave late due to the length of this float.

This deeper float features more paddling than fishing. Wise anglers should concentrate on the flowing water upstream and downstream of stream drops and enjoy

(Left) Smallmouth bass in the Tug are abundant in size and numbers. (Right) The low head dam in Williamson must be portaged around. A distinct metal wall marks the dam's location.



LEE McCLELLAN PHOTO

Here, rocky bars hold smallmouth bass. Probe these areas with the skirted grub and the finesse worm. In late summer and fall, let these lures rest on the bottom and let the current flutter them. Smallmouth bass often cannot resist this presentation.

The next mile or so features some of this section's infrequent shoals rimmed with water willow. Work a 3-inch, sexy shad-colored swimbait in the deep flowing water near the shoals, and along the water willow beds.

The Tug flows gently until a railroad bridge appears in the distance, followed by the U.S. 119 Bridge. Paddlers must prepare for a dangerous low head dam awaiting them a few hundred yards upstream of the highway bridge.

This dam was created in the 1980s to serve the water treatment plant of Williamson, West Virginia. Local officials are studying ways to make the passage safer as they create a water trail for the Tug Fork.

Anglers may park behind the water plant and carry their boats out via a path behind a metal retaining wall upstream of the dam. Paddlers may also portage on either side of the dam. Local anglers report catches of hefty smallmouth bass in excess of three pounds below the dam.

For this shuttle, continue on WV 49 from the Matewan access. The road follows the river for approximately 9½ miles. Turn left onto U.S. 52 and continue for two miles. Turn left onto Vinson Street, then an immediate left onto East Third Avenue to the parking area.

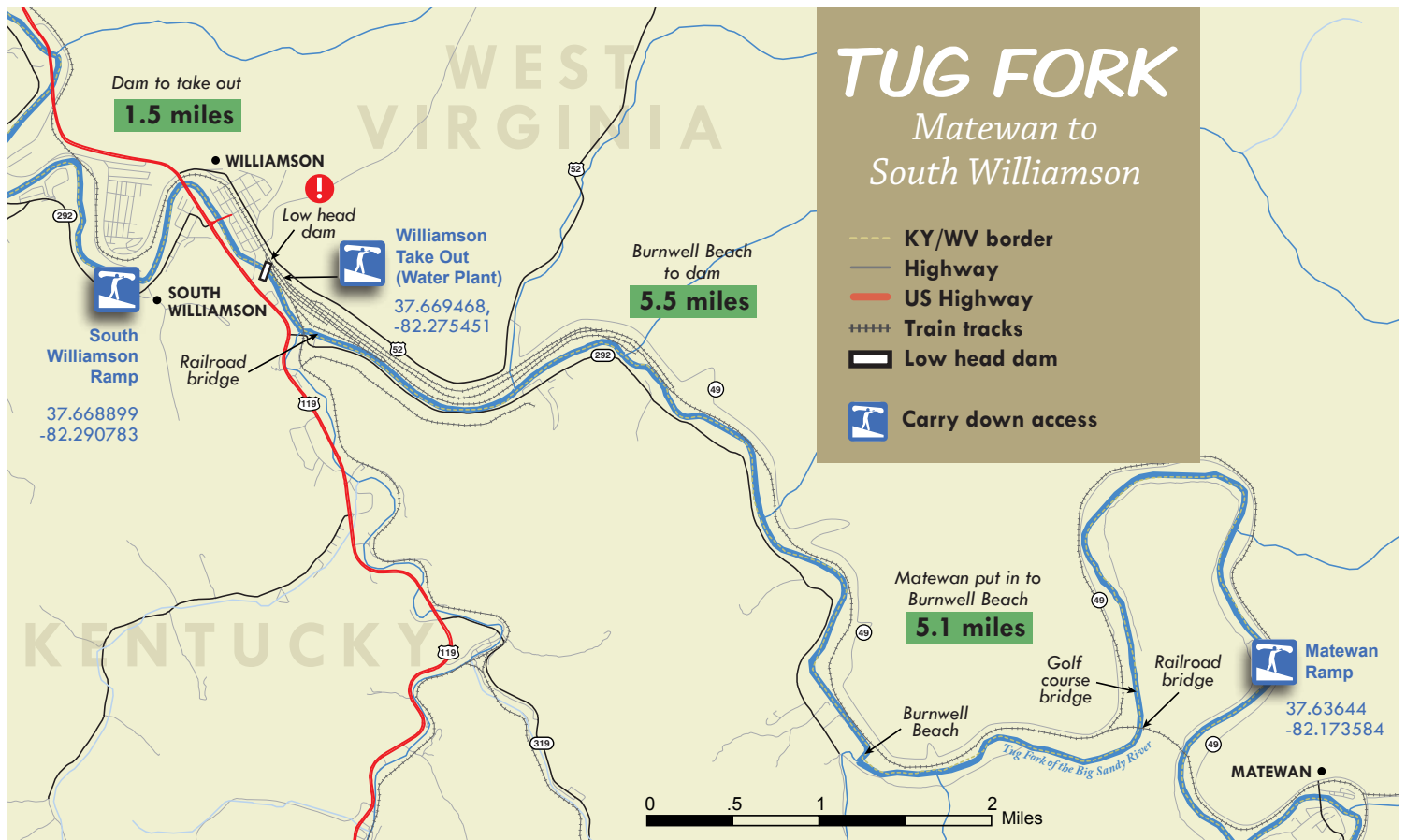
Boaters also may paddle for more than

a mile to reach a concrete boat ramp in South Williamson, Kentucky. The ramp on river left, just downstream of a hard right bend and deep hole.

Vehicles for this shuttle should continue on WV 49 from the Matewan access. The road follows the river for approximately 9½ miles. Turn left onto U.S. 52 and continue for two miles. Turn left onto Harvey Street and cross the river into Kentucky. Cross U.S. 119 and continue on Second Street. Turn left onto Central Avenue (KY 292) for slightly more than half a mile then turn right, before restaurant. Look for a small white sign marking the entrance.

The Tug Fork combines history, scenery and excellent fishing in the eastern most section of Kentucky. It is worth the drive to this incredibly scenic corner of the state. ■

Learn more about the Hatfield-McCoy Feud and more of what Pike County has to offer online at tourpikecounty.com, or call (606) 432-5063.



OBIE WILLIAMS MAPS