

Lap by lap, he swam to Tulsa

By Martha Tanner
GAZETTE STAFF

You've probably heard about all those folks who've swum the English Channel and those guys who have tried to ride over Niagara Falls in a barrel.

No doubt though that Delbert Schmand is the first to swim the length of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System — 445 miles.

However, he didn't swim the river itself. Schmand, 73, did his laps in a pool, most of them patiently over a 14-year period, even before the McClellan-Kerr Navigation System was opened.

He finished his last mile about 10 a.m. Monday. "It was a thrilling experience," he said.

Schmand, of 7511 L. St., a retired engineer with the Little Rock District of the Army Engineers and former executive director of the Little Rock Port Authority, had worked on the McClellan-Kerr route. He retired from the Port Authority in 1977.

The idea to swim the length of the route came to him after he saw a map of it on the wall in a Corps office. The route had magnets along it to show the destination of the barges, and the magnets had the barges' name on them. The total mileage of the route gave him a numbered figure to shoot for.

Though he is 73, his age has not kept him down. He recently returned from a trip to Hawaii, where he swam and went snorkeling in the Pacific Ocean. He began swimming as a boy in the Boy Scouts. He now also enjoys fishing,



— Staff Photo by Gene Prescott

Schmand pauses 'en route' up the Arkansas River.

hunting and dancing, and is the author of a book on the 120-year history of First Lutheran Church, where he is a member.

Schmand is in good health despite a "little hernia and a spike on my heel." Because of internal blockage, he had a kidney removed in 1940.

Prior to 1974, Schmand kept only an informal record of his swimming miles. That year, he got serious about his swimming, and began keeping a log. In 1979, he decided to finish out the distance of the navigation system, which runs from the Mississippi River near Arkansas Post in southeastern Arkansas through Little Rock to Fort Smith and ends at Tulsa.

He had done most of his swimming toward his goal at the YMCA at 6th and Broadway. When the Bess Chisum Stephens YWCA opened in 1980 and he discovered

the YWCA was accepting male members, he switched to it.

When he first started the long swim, "it took him twice as long to swim a mile," said Mary Lou Jaworski, executive director of the Stephens YWCA. Schmand said at first he could swim a mile about every hour and a half to two hours. He said he worked his way up to doing the mile in 55 minutes.

"Sometimes I would lose count and when I did, I'd look at the clock." He said he would then figure he had swum a mile an hour after looking at the clock.