

How one man changed Somerset

by Phillip Bock Editor -- Aug 16, 2012



Charles Kuralt is pictured with the Raleigh family and his “On the Road” crew during their initial visit to Somerset in 1972. Pictured, from left to right, is CBS cameraman Isadore Bleckman, a CBS electrician, Alice Raleigh, Jack Raleigh, Charles Kuralt, Pat Raleigh and a CBS sound man. *Submitted photo*

It was forty years ago when CBS correspondent Charles Kuralt put Somerset on the map with a national news broadcast about the budding tubing business, providing an

instant boost to the small town's economy — a boost that continues to keep them afloat today.

Pat Raleigh said he still remembers the call that changed Somerset forever. The year was 1972, and Raleigh was working a hectic shift at the River's Edge Restaurant, owned and operated by his parents, Jack and Alice Raleigh. The two owners were gone that evening due to a medical emergency, leaving Pat to man the phones.

During one particular call, Pat "just about fell out of his chair" when he recognized the voice on the other end of the line. It was Kuralt, of CBS's "On the Road with Charles Kuralt" fame.

Kuralt had been given a brochure about the business by sports writer Heywood Hale Broun — a brochure Pat and his mother sent out years earlier when the business was struggling.

"We were just at the embryonic stages of Apple River tubing," Pat Raleigh said. "We wanted to draw more crowds to the tubing side of our business."

Kuralt had been filming a segment in Prairie Du Chien, Wis., and told Pat he'd stop by the fledging Apple River tubing business on his way into Minneapolis "to see what the tubing craze was all about." Several days later Kuralt and his crew arrived, but what was supposed to be a short stay turned into a three day vacation on the river.

"He fell in love with my parents," Pat said. "I knew within a matter of minutes that they were made out of the same class. They were undecided on doing the story, but one hour after meeting my parents they decided to do the story."

Local media were alerted and, despite a 65 degree June day, approximately 500 people turned out to tube down the river during the taping of a segment for Kuralt's show. Isadore Bleckman, the cameraman for On the Road at the time, said he and the crew were surprised by the turnout.

“I remember it was a pretty cold day,” Bleckman said. “But it was fun and we had a great time.”

Kuralt would come back to the riverside restaurant 19 times over the next several years, including in 1990 to celebrate Alice Ralieggh’s 50 year anniversary in the restaurant business.

“She was one of the rare, generous people of this world,” Kuralt said in a letter to the family. “Everybody loved her, and I among them. I was embarrassed that she made such a fuss over me — until I realized she treated everybody that way.”

On July 3, 1972, in front of an estimated 52 million people, the segment ran during the Evening News with Walter Cronkite. Somerset, and the businesses within it, immediately felt the impact.

“The next day I swear there were 20,000 people on the river,” Pat said. “It was mass confusion. Nobody had bussing then.”

The bussing started soon after as a response to the increase in tourists to the small town. Prior to buses, visitors would park one car at River’s Edge and another near the end point of the tubing ride.

“We started bussing that summer in 1972,” Pat said. “Within two years, everyone was bussing.”

The tubing business took off and Somerset became known as a tourist destination. In the next three years, Apple River tubing went on to be featured in an estimated 500 newspaper, radio and television stories, Pat estimated.

“Within three years the town grew to one million tourists,” Pat said.

Bleckman, who accompanied Kuralt on the road for 25 years, said he and the crew were aware their influence impacted the communities they visited and that they enjoyed bringing attention to the lesser-known community attractions.

“It felt good,” Bleckman said. “Charles used to say there were always interesting people that nobody knew about.”

Things have changed since the original tourist boon. In the mid 80s, the Apple River became known as a party destination as crowds from Minnesota crossed the border to take advantage of the drinking age, which was 18 at the time. In 1986 the drinking age was changed to 21 and the river was shut down and cleaned up. River’s Edge reopened with a new focus on family in the late 1980s.

“We brought it back slowly and discouraged the drinking,” Pat said.

Even after 40 years, Kuralt’s fondness for Apple River tubing and Raleigh’s famous frog legs, for which their restaurant was known in the 1970s, continues to bring people to the small town.

“People still come in today and say they saw the story. I had one lady from California come in this year who said she saw the business on the Walter Cronkite hour several years ago,” Pat said. “She said, ‘I think it was 25 years ago.’ She was shocked when I told her it was 40 years ago.”



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