



Craig F. Walker / Berkshire Eagle Staff

Winning Viking women at yesterday's Housatilla Float, front to back, are Cheryl Hutto, Robin Sterling, Belle Fox-Martin and Pat Pixley.

By Mary-Jane Tichenor

Berkshire Eagle Staff

GREAT BARRINGTON — A steady downpour didn't dampen the fun for participants and spectators yesterday at the very first Housatonic River Flotilla, which started on the river banks adjacent to Searles Middle School on Bridge Street.

Trees on the river bank provided natural umbrellas, and no one got sunburned.

Rachel Fletcher and Genie Stevens were at the school by 8 to direct volunteers — more than 100 of them — who were preparing for the event to celebrate the entire community and its link to the river.

"Bernard Kirchner, chief boat marshal, set up the staging and rigging, no easy job," Fletcher said. Kirchner is a member of the South County Paddlers, a recreational group that takes canoe trips on the river, which now is "fine for canoeing," Fletcher said. Kirchner will lead a river-bottom cleanup to remove the debris that the canoers saw. The clean-up will be from 9 to 1 on Aug. 10.

Fletcher, a theater designer, has been in Great Barrington for 10 years and organized the original series of river bank cleanups in the town with Glen Chamberlin.

Performing artists, businesses, environmentalists and just plain private citizens entered 49 decorated canoes, rafts, rowboats, kayaks and a solar boat as a tribute to the river, which connects most of Berkshire County and prompted the founding of the town of Great Barrington.

Sheila Moede, Jim, Arlee and So Happy Davids, representatives of the Mahican Indians, returned to Great Barrington from Bowler, Wis., to lead the flotilla. The Mahican or River Indians, who controlled the Housatonic river basin in the South Berkshires from at least 3,000 years ago, gave the river its name. It has been variously translated as "place beyond the mountains" and "land of the moving waters."

Paul Guyler of Sheffield directed traffic around the school's circular drive, reserved for participants, and showed others where to park.

Volunteer Barbara Syer laced on her high L.L. Bean rubber boots to man her station at the water's edge.

By noon, some floats already were in the water. One consisted of a 7-foot, 8-

BOATS, continued on B5

Down to the river in ships — and canoes and so on



Craig F. Walker / Berkshire Eagle Staff

Members of Berkshire Public Theatre floated down the Housatonic aboard their raft, called *The Jester*.

Down to the river in ships — and canoes

■ BOATS, from B1

inch high Berkshire Public Theatre banner atop wooden slabs on four truck tubes. There to propel it with four long poles on its one-mile course down to Eisner Camp on Brookside Road were BPT members Joe Casey, Shane Barabanel, Glenn Barrett and Don Mandigo.

BPT members Wanda Libardi and Meg Robertson watched from the shore. They planned to entertain later on an island in the river near the fairgrounds.

Robin Sterling's "Viking Women" were calling their canoe "Valhalla," just for fun, she said. They had kept their gold, white and black dragon head dry with plastic and had decorated the sides of the canoe with Viking shields. On their heads, they wore Viking helmets. They played Wagner on their tape recorder and lighted flaming torches on the dragon's head just before the parade started. First prize was theirs.

On the banks, Pamela Hardcastle and Barbara Bockbrader were turning their canoe, painted gold and green, into a "Garden of Eden." Delicious apples and a

Tibetan flying frog hung from gilded branches and bittersweet vines. A long twisted vine, perhaps 4 inches in diameter, had been artistically painted and turned into a serpent. Its head once was a football, out of which protruded two gold fangs. They took second prize.

John Mooney of Housatonic strolled among participants with a large basket filled with Fritos and apples for those who hadn't taken the time to get lunch across the street. The picnic had been moved indoors to the Charles Snyder building across the street. All the food was donated.

Fletcher was concerned about one boat that had arrived by river and hadn't registered.

Volunteer Frosty Montgomery, in a yellow slicker and hat, said that a tent had been set up at the other end as protection for the rain. "And there are bales of hay out for people to sit on," she added.

"Greed — Hinsdale" was the title of one garbage-filled canoe. With lots of fake money sticking out of his pocket, Wadsworth Pierce was to ride with a "bimbo," in the person of Jennifer Dempsey, and James

Lamme as "an unscrupulous lawyer."

About 15 minutes before the launching was to start, Margot Paddock arrived to decorate the "M.I.N.E. — Hinsdale" canoe to show that "Money Isn't Everything." A profusion of flowers and plants were placed on mats of green grass for the passenger, a white-gowned young woman.

Some waited for the last minute to decorate because of the rain, which didn't seem to have done much damage.

Spectators, many with gaily covered golf umbrellas, spanned the bridge over the river in anticipation of the flotilla.

The Berkshire Highlanders and a trumpeter from the Monday Night Brass Quartet performed before the flotilla.

A round of bagpipe music opened the official proceedings. Judges were piped down the river bank to seats at the edge of the water.

One judge was Kate McCormick, who in June of 1989 organized 60 of her then-8th-grade classmates to clean up the river bank beside the school. "Without that cleanup, this never could

have happened," Fletcher said.

Other judges were Peter Brewer, Rotary Club president; Phylene Farrell, director of the South Berkshire Chamber of Commerce; State Sen. Christopher Hodgkins, D-Lee; Edward Morehouse, Great Barrington selectman; State Sen. Jane Swift, R-North Adams, and George Wislocki, director of the Berkshire Natural Resources Council. They awarded 10 prizes and commended other participants.

Susan Witt was the judges' hostess.

As the parade began with a brass horn fanfare, the red ribbon suspended by helium balloons was cut by the Mahicans. Spectators tossed showers of bubbles and environment-friendly rose petals.

The flotilla proceeded to the fairgrounds and then to Eisner Camp for a picnic, coordinated by Mary Gilligan and Melvin Katsh.

Entertainment was by Steve Silverstein of Music Theatre Group, B P Country Express Western Dance and Next Stage.

The event was "the first and last annual — unless you really want to do it again," the organizers said.



Craig F. Walker / Berkshire Eagle Staff

Steve Silverstein of the Music-Theatre Group blew an ancient horn in his Viking-style canoe at the Housatilla.