

HOUSATILLA FLOAT (THE HOUSATONIC RIVER FLOTILLA)

August 3, 1991

By Rachel Fletcher

The first annual Housatilla Float, a community-wide parade on the Housatonic River (Great Barrington, Massachusetts) of nearly fifty decorated canoes, kayaks, rafts and rowboats. Commemorated recent clean-up efforts and celebrated the river as the community's common link.

Great Barrington stands with its back to the Housatonic River, but on August 3, a "Housatilla Float" of nearly fifty amazing vessels turned the river into Main Street for a day.

Conditions were hardly favorable for a flotilla. July's drought left little water in the river, and the skies, for the first time in weeks, poured forth with a steady rain. Still, more than a hundred brave souls managed to paddle, push, and otherwise persuade decorated rowboats, kayaks, rafts, and canoes from Searles Middle School on Bridge Street to a wet, but warm-hearted picnic at Eisner Camp.

At 2 o'clock, bagpipes and trumpet fanfares led dignitaries past the boaters to places of honor at the bridge by the starting gate. US Rep. John W Olver attended, also State Sen. Jane Swift, State Rep. Chris Hodgkins, George Wislocki, Rotary President Peter Brewer, Selectman Edward Morehouse, and Kate McCormick who in 1989 led her then-eighth-grade classmates to clean the bank where the parade began.

Stockbridge-Munsee representatives Sheila Moede and Jim and Arlee Davids, descendants of the Mohicans who gave the Housatonic its name, returned from Bowler, Wisconsin to travel the river of their homeland for the first time in 200 years. Cutting a red ribbon suspended by helium balloons, they proceeded past the bridge under a shower of "environmentally-friendly" rose petals and were on their way.

Artists, farmers, businessmen, environmentalists, sportsmen, and families followed in grand procession. A Garden of Eden created by landscape artists Barbara Bockbrader and Pamela Hardcastle displayed a serpent and tree of apples that dangled from huge twisting vines of bittersweet. A Noah's Ark entered by Berkshire Green Alliance flew a banner of planet earth and sported teddy bears on the mast. Animals were abundant, from a canoe-bodied mallard entered by Berkshire Environmental Research Center to the Food and Land Council's "endangered" and thoroughly adorable local dairy cow.

In grand fashion, Viking Women escorted Valhalla, a dragon that breathed fire to chords of Wagner from a tape cassette. Meanwhile, the Viking ship of Music-Theatre Group moved to calls of ancient horns.

A number of sailing contraptions more or less made the journey, undaunted by punctured inner tubes (Berkshire Public Theatre) and Shakespeare & Company's early miscalculation of the height of the bridge. There was a Wheeler & Taylor insurance adjuster with fire-fighting rig, a team

of Kelly, Granger, & Parsons explorers, and a fabulous assortment of Druidic and other more locally derived vegetative and agricultural wonders.

The Berkshire Courier revived the spirit of Great Barrington's own local hermit and ferryman, George Crosby, while *The Record* paid tribute to Mark Twain. S.H.A.R.E. "floated a loan" of assorted local currencies. Hinsdale was represented twice, first by Greed, a filthy garbage barge with landfill operator, girlfriend, and unscrupulous lawyer, then again by M.I.N.E. (Money Is Not Everything) and its pristine vision of maidenly beauty and honor.

Local land trusts were well represented, with Sheffield guiding a graceful sailing rig, New Marlboro offering comic relief, and Great Barrington doing its best to navigate a floating duck blind.

Actors and dancers gamely adjusted theatre and two-step programs to soggy conditions, while more than a hundred volunteers sloshed and slugged it out in the rain to direct traffic, prepare food, and make sure every boat got into the water, through the course, then up and over the take-out bank.

The Housatilla Float commemorated recent riverbank clean-ups in Great Barrington and the removal of more than 125,000 pounds of refuse and rubble by 200 volunteers. For the Great Barrington Conservancy that sponsored the flotilla, it was a step towards securing the management of a community River Walk behind Brooks Pharmacy, owned by Melvin Katsh, and the Community Land Trust offices on Main Street, where two clean-ups have taken place. The River Walk is designed by Peter Jensen.

As our Stockbridge-Munsee friends chided, we may have come a fair way, but have a long way to go. So, the following Saturday, a dozen volunteers joined Bernard Kirchner of South County Paddlers to remove tires, shopping carts, and other debris spotted earlier by boaters in the parade.

In broader terms, the Housatilla celebrated the entire Berkshire community, with the river as its common link. Besides an astounding variety of entries, each paying tribute in its own special way, local papers wrote stories on a diversity of river themes. Bernard Drew took *Courier* readers on a tour of properties along the route, promoting the river as a "microcosm of Great Barrington's agricultural, industrial, and social history." Meanwhile, novice Roxanne Jacoby who entered the small and fragile "floating bubble," gave *Record* audiences a rollicking account of personal adventures awaiting first-time river travelers.

Steve Moore of *The Eagle* chronicled an archaeological dig taking place upstream of a 2500 year old Mohican river settlement. Lael Locke of *The Paper* described recent clean-up efforts by the Great Barrington Housatonic Riverbank Clean-up. Artist Ellen Murtagh provided a special artistic rendition of the Housatonic River. And photographer Clemens Kalisher mounted a photo-essay with river scenes of canoeing, fishing, agriculture, industry, and pure natural beauty.

The message was loud and clear. Water is vital to all forms of life and the waters of the Housatonic form the spine of our Berkshire landscape.

Rachel Fletcher conceived and co-organized the Housatilla Float