

Thirty Seven Leagues to the Zee

"Hello, my name is Roger, and the color of my kayak is purple" was said in the prescribed fashion of introduction to my new gang of fellow Hudson River paddlers. Introductions were actually the conclusion of the morning safety briefing, knowing who is on the water with you by name is the start of good communication. The next step was to set our boats onto the river at the Cornell pocket park in New Baltimore, NY, on a misty Saturday morning, **August 8, 2009**. The purple Looksha Sport (14' 4") with rudder was the only grape colored craft in a bunch of mostly banana hued hulls.

Many of my new companion kayakers standing in the circle started out six days before from a park in the town of Moreau near Fort Edward at the confluence of the Hudson River and the Champlain Canal on a lengthy 192 mile "thru" paddle to Pier 96 in Manhattan. Lake Champlain with a mean elevation of 95.6 feet above sea level flows north to Canada. The Fort Edward Lock would be the first of seven descending steps to sea level in Albany. Previous years this annual event was titled: "The Great Hudson River Paddle". In honor of Henry Hudson's and Samuel de Champlain's historic explorations 400 years ago this ninth annual event was named "The Great Champlain-Hudson Paddle" (GCHP).

Privately, I was celebrating both 400 year anniversaries with enthusiasm. These last 30 years I've been working, playing, and living near Lake Champlain in Vermont. The first 25 years of my life were invariably influenced by the Hudson River. If completed the 113 miles of the river I signed up for would be a celebratory down river run to the sea.

Compared to the average skill level of most the other paddlers I was novice. Horse sense cautioned weather and tide conditions could conspire to make the last leg into Manhattan dicey. In my application I prudently selected to have Yonkers, somewhat beyond the most southern boundary of the Tappan Zee, as my goal line. Personally, for all intents and purposes, if I could see the George Washington Bridge from the scheduled landing at the Beczak Environmental Center in Yonkers, I had made it to New York City.

The New Baltimore Conservancy hosted an evening celebration, inviting the GCHP guides and paddlers the previous evening. Each tent and all camp gear was shoehorned into the one permitted over-sized duffel bag for ground transport. Everyone's kayak on the other hand was personally loaded with the standard mandatory safety gear, a gallon of water, lunch, and with whatever reasonably fit your fancy in the space remaining.

However brief or incidental, I had been on the water 60 times so far this spring and summer in a kayak or canoe for conditioning and to refresh on water instincts. Launch this morning meant the real deal was to begin.

Placing the loaded kayaks on the water, one or two at a time, was a group effort with four people always completing the carry, one on the bow and stern, and one on each side by the cockpit. As this process generally took some minutes to set some twenty something kayaks and paddlers on the water patience required a hove to the side or floating in a back eddy until the group formed up.

Before this ritual was completed this Saturday morning a young American Bald Eagle came down and alighted in a tree bough over the launch ramp. There could not have been a more memorable omen to this adventure. We were to see Eagles often throughout the day, and daily for the remainder of the paddle. I quickly became attuned to the Bald Eagle's call which is not unlike an Osprey's. Houghtaling Island fronting New Baltimore is one known Eagle nesting area.

The Hudson's flow is tidal as far north as Albany, and an international shipping channel as well. No small wonder was the immediate passing of MV Baluga Fusion, an ocean going, heavy lift, cargo vessel heading north. Beluga shipping uses a big painted out-of-water whale tail scene for a logo. While Beluga, white whales, are far northern coastal creatures, they one time inhabited Champlain's inland sea and still inhabit locations on the Saint Lawrence River. The 10,000 year old "Charlotte Whale", a Beluga, is Vermont's most celebrated fossil.

Other vessels passing down river included a variety of tug and barge combinations. One tug was a Buchard tug. A second tug was the Mary Taracoma pushing a barge named Portland.

More typically, the river was free and clear of ship traffic. On more than one occasion our group would make a complete stop mid-river to chat with north bound kayakers who seemed equally eager to exchange news about anything, river conditions, landings, destinations, etc. And of course, we'd either find out or put out that the Great Champlain Hudson Paddle was coming down river.

Two land falls this Saturday morning were at a former Hutton Brick yard and at the Coxsackie community waterfront where outdoor market vendors were just setting up. At noon we beached on an island called Middle Ground Flats, a well treed shallow shore beach environment in the middle of the river just north of the Stockport landing used by the Henry Hudson's Half Moon in 1609. Lunch breaks were just for that, for out-of-boat rests, and then some.

All together the group fielded a good variety of kayak type watercraft. A couple of the paddlers took advantage of the tail end of the lunch period today to try one of the two Hobie Mirages that darted around within our on water formation with ease. These have removable pedal driven devices that transfer circular rotary motion to linear side to side movement by two comely looking blades that work beneath the hull. Although the opening and closing motion is like that of a pair of bird wings the blades individually resemble sea turtle flippers. The "Rube Goldberg" appearances aside, the funnier aspect is that the rig worked like a machine.

More than a couple of kayakers used Greenland style paddles of white cedar such as those hand carved by Guide Jack Gilman. In lay terms a landlubber might want to describe this sometimes preferred paddle as blade-less, light weight, resembling two opposing baseball bats fused together in the middle and flattened at the ends. Two guides had handmade wood kayaks. Jack called his a "baidarka", a Russian word for "little boat". Guide Maggie Atking in her home made kayak were like a gymnast on a balance beam. She could move from in-cockpit position to sitting on the kayak's back deck, legs dangling overboard, and vice versa, while on the water.

One of the more notable surprises of the day, and maybe of the trip, something that wasn't on the tight schedule that makes this type of adventure possible, was coming alongside the working replica of the Half Moon for a photo opportunity. The Half Moon, was moored port side, bow pointing north, to a well maintained barge at Peckham Materials in Athens.

The first day on the water was exciting enough. Who knew what awaited us at Muderer's Kill Park and Boat Launch which was our overnight camp site just up river from the Half Moon.

Sunday, August 9

Part of the discussion preceding last night's meal was the unfolding news reports of a fatal mid-air collision over the Hudson involving a small plane and a helicopter near mid-town Manhattan. That's where this expedition was headed. Was there a chance this development could impact the group's arrival or was it just an unfortunate high profile coincidence? That aside, Scott Keller, paddle guide and consummate Hudson River Valley Greenway program planner, who called the day-to-day shots as well, had his eye on more immediate circumstances. The 17 plus miles we were to go and the relatively short time ebb would be to our favor moved reveille up to 5 am.

In the mornings Carol Roscher, guide, and ever present reminder of keeping your kayak, equipment, and person in standard order, would walk through our makeshift village of tents and calmly add voice to "time to get up". This was better than having 20 individual alarms sounding off sporadically, or heaven forbid, too prematurely. As it turns out we didn't need reveille this morning.

Seven bass boats and all the horsepower, trailers, and clatter it takes to launch them descended upon Murderer's Creek Boat Launch at an ungodly hour rendering reveille obsolete. Spirited and loud, talking above the throaty idling of the boat engines, they congregated in the mouth of the creek waiting for sunrise like SUVs idling at a stop light. Fortunately, the high speed platforms disappeared quickly to parts unknown up and down the river once the light changed.

Once out into the river the first visual was the Hudson-Athens Lighthouse in the distance. To cross the channel to the east side we formed up in a fashion of an oblique marching maneuver and quick timed to the other side. Settling down to a full stop for a "water up" (hydrating drink) and a breather we could look back and catch a view of the easterly escarpments of the Catskills. The summits remained hidden in the low ceiling cloud cover.

Further on we bobbed on under the Rip Van Winkle Bridge and passed abeam of Catskill Point. While no one was dawdling, we weren't paddling strenuously either. The pull of the out flowing tide was significant which would absolutely be to our advantage in covering the 17 plus mile leg today.

Soon on our port side was Mount Marino from whose top peaked the roofs of Frederic Church's architecturally famous Persian styled home "Olana". Frederic Church was one of the more prominent Hudson River School painters.

Following the moving of my parents household items in 2000 I discovered a wall in the old home porch room for eons had quietly displayed an ignored mass produced copy of a painting by Jasper Cropsey of the Hudson River School titled "A Mountain Glimpse" (1854). My mother would have simply called its acquisition a sign of her good tastes. The Newington Crospey Foundation says the original has been in the collection of the White House since 1962. Cropsey became known as America's painter of autumn, one of his celebrated paintings is titled "Sunset on the Palisades".

Of the ship traffic passing us today one tug and barge combination was powered by the Tug Jason McAllister passing up river. The boat was most likely of the McAllister tugboat clan of whom two descendants were in high school with me. Our late morning stop brought us to the Germantown State Fishing Access Site which meant stepping out of the kayaks for a stretch and a prolonged gander at the Catskill Cement Works structures defining the opposite shore.

Wind and rain threatened most of the day's paddle. We did pull on rain gear for a brief period. Come 1 pm, following passing over "The Flats" which did foul the otherwise finely tuned Hobie Mirage paddle mechanisms with submerged plant material, we rounded the circular stone caisson supporting the Saugerties Lighthouse and proceeded up Esopus Creek. Our individual cockpit exit and boat retrieval was less uniform because of the higher dock at the Saugerties Coast Guard Station, where the 65 foot USCG Cutter "Wire" (WYTL 65612) ties up..

Besides being in good hands on a well maintained facility our camp location was practically on the trail head of the Ruth Reynolds Glunt Nature Preserve, a.k.a. "The Lighthouse Trail" which most of us ventured on between the ministrations of making camp, showering, and eating dinner. The half mile trail courses over sections of board walk and through fresh water tidal wetlands habitat supporting a wide variety of plants, a good many flowering. The trail ends at the tip of a peninsula weighted down by the 1869 red brick lighthouse which some toured. The walk invigorated legs otherwise immobilized in the kayak all day. The Lighthouse accentuated the scene, the mystery, and serious history of that spot while maintaining clear lines of sight north and south of that reach of river.

Monday, August 10th

The rain didn't hold off entirely but none of us campers had to move to higher ground either as was speculated last evening. The quiet night on the banks of the Esopus was punctuated occasionally by the croak of a heron. Dawn put rose colored clouds in the western sky. Shaking the adhering beads of water from her tent Carol quipped "rain fresh" is an over rated concept.

Once afloat the kayakers hugged the long post-commercial heyday bulkhead that impounded the far bank. A Great Blue Heron stilt walked or flitted one perch to another parallel to our outward bound, single file flotilla to the main river. Gaining the open channel we paused briefly for a "98" Tug / "Island" barge duo to pass before upping the paddling tempo. We crossed the channel to the eastern side. The bedrock islands of Magdalen and Cruger passed on our port side. These islands are like stone cairns marking the north and south Tivoli Bays, large but differing inter tidal marshes with unique on water opportunities for bird life viewing.

We transited back across the channel to visit a newly improved Hudson River Water Trail stop just north of Turkey Point. By the time we passed under the span of the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge up from below rose "The Flat", another mid-river shallow water mud bottom extending several miles down river. The channel inevitably moved closer to the banks. Way ahead today an ocean going ship maneuvered the west to east bend of the Kingston Reach and passed around its southern end.

While Cormorants are common, maybe even a nuisance, but approaching their roost and nesting young, there on the lone Kingston Flat day marker had the feel of a safari. Especially for its remoteness the scene of the Cormorants ganging on the support lattice could have as well been vultures in the branches of a solitary African Balboa Tree a world away.

Our port of call for the day was a good hour away in Kingston up the Roundout. A quick pit stop on Kingston beach strewn with Hutton brick debris from the bygone brickworks era was a welcomed breather.

The group's starboard turn into the yawning mouth of the Roundout Creek, watched over by the Roundout Lighthouse, seemed to coincide with a serious spike in the heat. The floating Tug Gowanus Bay (1956) tethered pier side and a vintage collection of WWII torpedo boats on blocks on the bank shimmered in the sun as we coasted up to the Hudson River Maritime Museum. Clearly, we were passing maritime treasure and a maritime bone yard.

The high temperature lost its edge once we were ambling about free of our splash skirts, PFDs, and other heat absorbing gear. Tents immediately sprang up under the bow, beam, and stern of the Steam Tug Mathilda, the Hudson River Maritime Museum's premier land exhibit. Museum staff and a number of our guides bustled about setting up for a joint news conference. The rest of us put the sun to work drying whatever gear could be dried. A personal ambition while in Kingston was to mail 20 Hudson River themed post cards, now the messages in a bottle equivalent in this age of text messaging.

The ground crew arrived, perspired, and persevered to set up canopies, deliver needed services, and facilitate the preparation of authentic Mexican food for dinner. Among the welcoming well wishers a former participant in the GHRP arrived to donate several containers of their Keegan beverage labeled Mother's Milk. The hospitality of the museum reached the five star hotel level for some paddlers when the evening's heat lightening matured into a full blown thunder and lightning downpour. Floor space in the climate controlled exhibit rooms was offered to those of us who were not too indignant to the very idea.

The 1898 Steam Tug Mathilda (originally donated to the Museum by a James McAllister) stoked my fascination. Once a bona fide "boiler technician" who stood underway watches in the fireroom and other main propulsion spaces of US Navy ships I had background with some family tradition in steam. Seeing the 400th Anniversary Discover NY poster displayed up and down the river, including on the burgee we sailed under, celebrated "Fulton" as well as the names of Hudson and Champlain, fascination was in order.

The "Hudson-Fulton-Champlain" tag line appeared to be copied from the 300th year anniversary theme when the Fulton legacy was at full throttle approximately 100 years after his "folly". Or at least that seemed to be the indication judging by the reproductions of the 300th anniversary poster reduced to post card size and available in the Museum Gift Shop.

I'd be remiss if I didn't make a connection to an historic marker at the ferry dock back in Burlington, VT, on Lake Champlain. The rusty heavy gage metal sign begins "Steamer Vermont launched here in 1808", and it continues to explain "the second successful steamboat to operate commercially, 2 years after Robert Fulton made his historic trip up the Hudson on the Clermont". The Vermont was built at the sign's location. The Museum's logo calls attention to the Hudson River Steamboat era.

Tom Ryan's first words to me after a warm welcome upon arrival in New Baltimore were "so what county were your folks from?" Tom's running of the expedition's logistics and supervision of the land crew was seamless and it's hard not to like the guy who sees to all key material needs and good food to keep the engines going. Tom shared as a youngster living up the river from Chelsea like he'd see the famed Steamship Alexander Hamilton like clock work everyday at 1 PM steaming to Poughkeepsie. I happened to have a vintage postcard of the Alexander Hamilton stowed away in my kit and was happy to offer it to someone for whom it had greater significance.

On the edge of success at mailing off my batch of postcards, a purchase at the Museum's store replenished my stock. I particularly liked the postcard portrait of the Half Moon at Newburgh Landing by James Douglas as a keepsake.

Tuesday, August 11th

Departing the Maritime Museum was deja vu to yesterday's beginning only we retraced our course down the Roundout in place of the Esopus, and left the Roundout instead of the Saugerties Lighthouse behind over our shoulders. Today's summer heat would rise with the sun in the sky and this would be the day I would drink the whole provision of one gallon of water contained in four freshly filled Nalgene bottles behind my seat.

The size of our party would be smaller today. The two Hobie Mirage paddle boats would be missed. At least two other kayakers had made Kingston their point of departure. Distancing ourselves Kingston and Rhinecliff shores our first pause and photo op of the day found us at the companionway of the mid-river Esopus Meadows Lighthouse. Surrounded by water the stone steps built into the circular all stone caissons supporting the house, nothing more, was inviting but declined nonetheless. The large "1871" wasn't the house number rather its year of construction. The closest thing to someone being home was the image of a black cat set in one of the first floor window panes.

With the Lighthouse still in view we did a quick stop at the Esopus Meadows Preserve Park. Underway again we passed under the imposing Mount St. Alphonsus Monastery on the ridge of the west bank before slotting down the east side of Esopus Island.

We soon crossed channel back to the west side cutting through a "special anchorage" passing between two vessels riding at anchor. The most northerly vessel was the Spar Virgo, a bulk carrier with Bergen (Norway) as home port painted over its stern. The other was a tug and barge combination and both vessels we learned would ride anchor there until the tide turned to provide a more advantageous time to navigate up river.

Since our pod of kayaks was to be in close proximity to Spar Virgo, Dan, in an often repeated courtesy, would use radio on ship channel to contact the ship's bridge and inform them of our intention to make a close approach to pass astern. Further down we made landfall on a rock beach. The Hyde Park rail station was directly across the river. On the same side of the river the Vanderbilt Mansion roofs and chimneys barely poked above the tree tops. Land wise we were in West Park and a short over-land journey from John Burroughs' former residence. John Burroughs (1837-1921) is one of Hudson Valley's most celebrated authors.

Belonging to the John Burroughs Association since the 1970s I'm familiar with his writing retreats, his Catskill haunts, his family farm site and final resting place in Roxbury, and with the content of his 29 books. In Burroughs time American nature writing had reached a formidable dimension. As an author and prodigious magazine writer he was known to criticize other writers for embellishing wildlife observation with human traits. With that in mind consider the following excerpt from the "River View" chapter in his 7th volume titled, "Signs and Seasons"(1886).

"The eagle seldom or never turns his back upon a storm. I think he loves to face the wildest elemental commotion. I shall long carry the picture of one I saw floating northward on a large raft of ice one day, in the face of a furious gale of snow. He stood with his talons buried in the ice, his head straight out before him, his closed wings showing their strong elbows, a type of stern defiance and power."

"This great metropolitan river, as it were, with its floating palaces, and shores lined with villas, is thus an inlet and a highway of the wild and the savage. The wild ducks and geese still follow it north in spring, and south in fall. The loon pauses in his migrations and deports himself in its waters. Seals and otters are occasionally seen in it."

At the Crumb Elbow bend in the river we were at the northern end of the "Poughkeepsie Deep", a 14 mile stretch of the river formed by a large trench. Water depths start at 30 feet and increase to the bottom where they exceed 125 feet. Nearer to Poughkeepsie we would be at the northern limit of the low salinity zone, 0.5 to 5.0 ppm chloride. Average seawater salinity is approximately 36,000 ppm.

Following the Elbow the river straightens which led us onto Lloyd, Highland Landing, or otherwise called "McLaughlin's Landing" in jest. Being of considerable stature and local renown himself, Dan McLaughlin was the expeditionary right hand man. Highland Landing is his front yard but his multiple career experiences, including riding back seat in F-4s in the Air Force, imparted numerous skills and unlimited story telling material which helped color our time on the water.

This evening Dan switched from river guide to local host and led us on a pre-grand opening tour of the Hudson River's latest trail, the Poughkeepsie-Highland Railroad Bridge. This former trains-only bridge, turning into the world class 216 foot high Walkway Over the Hudson on October 2nd, was the first span over the Hudson south of Albany. Built in 1888 it was a strategic east-west rail link through WWII. The views of the Hudson from the bridge rival those from the Palisades.

Upon our return to the Landing from the walking tour we were treated to music by Jeff Anzevino's Blue Grass Band. While the evening music was excellent the frequent, close passing, whistle blowing, CSX freight trains thundering through the night were horrific. Dan had the only ears that could filter a choochoo's rumbling steel-on-steel stampede and temper the noise down to a faint ca-ching sound.

Opposite Highland Landing is the City of Poughkeepsie and on its waterfront is the Hudson River Rowing Association boathouse off Water Street. Our group actually attended a GCHP orientation day with the guides a month earlier at that boathouse. Besides first encounters and in-water assisted rescue exercises we also received the low down on do-and-don't(s) and on every other expectation. When preparing for the paddle at home we were asked to stencil our gear with initials or with some distinguishing mark. The boathouse, the docks, and the rowing shells stacked on racks brought back the years (1971-1974) on the Manhattan College Crew team. The thought of putting initials or the pattern of the old alma mater blade mark on my kayak paddles crossed my mind but was ruled out. So I opted to codify them with two bands of green tape around the black shafts instead. Back in the day the old crew club toyed with the idea of rowing up the Hudson as a promotional stunt and for training. We didn't but the idea of rowing the river stuck with me.

Wednesday, August 12

We were off and floating now following "thank you(s)" to our Highland Landing hosts. On such mornings we bade farewell with a hale and hearty three cheers to hosts, well wishers, and friends. Moving southward we were promptly overtaken by the Adriatic Sea barge and tug also heading down river. Not that it mattered because of the angle and huge difference in elevation we more smiled at the idea than for the camera held by an unidentified photographer watching out for us to pass below under the Mid-Hudson Bridge. The Adelaide (La Farge) barge pushed by the Doris Moran Tug then passed going up river.

We pulled onto the west shore for a 15 minute trail mix break. Across the river we had a bird's eye view of the huge dolomite trap rock operation, with a less obvious view of the full extent of the quarry. Clusters of Buchanan barges were loaded down with crushed stone. So inspired and just for fun one guide jokingly loaded down the hatch compartment of another guide's kayak with a melon size rock but was readily discovered and removed.

The pod was more practiced now at pacing. Guide Mark Mykytyn had the point most of the trip. His style of paddling comes close to sauntering over water. His upper body movement is effortless while his kayak sways and bobs like a basking shark or pitches and yaws like a fishing trawler. At a minimum his relaxed style is worthy of imitation. If you can't, you at least enjoy following a leader.

The power plants on Danskammer Point ("teufel's danskammer" - Dutch for devil's dance hall) came into view on the starboard side. Soon there after we were paddling through the spread of floating boat moorings at the Chelsea Yacht Club on the east shore. Moments prior a lone kayaker stopped to share a quick chat with a number of us. On his journey he had come over from Long Island Sound before turning up river at Spuyten Duyvil (in spite of the devil). Obviously driven to go the distance every day he was surprised to hear Chelsea was as far as our group would go today.

The Chelsea Yacht Club looked like a home and they gave us the run of the place. There were awnings to sit under when the thunderstorm came and unleashed a deluge. Showers for bathing were actually on site. The formal, nautically appointed rooms made for comfortable sitting, as did the gazebo outside. While the afternoon thunderstorm came and went rain fell off and on throughout the night. Tracing this side of the river are the commuter train tracks. Although passing just as close as the CSX freight trains of Highland Landing the commuter trains are a lot easier on the ears, plus they stop running eventually.

In a spare moment Jack took me around the back of the house so I wouldn't miss seeing the brick work in the chimney. What appears to be a respectable unassuming chimney is all that except there are bricks in the courses that have the manufacturer's name or the name of the brick yard set outwardly with aplomb. A finished granite block shows the chimney was built in 1910. The variety of red bricks came from former brick yards, some ghost towns today, seen up and down the river.

Thursday, August 13

In breaking camp this morning we had the option of stacking our soggy tents in back of the land crew's yellow Penske truck separately instead of stowing them in our individually issued duffel bag soaking wet. This was our one carry on piece of luggage, so to speak, voluminous and generously decorated with Hudson River Greenway theme logos. Two VIPs were to accompany us in a double kayak to Cold Spring.

Once on the water more rain was likely. Bob Campbell, who took me under his wing and showed me a rope or two on the trip, loaned me a spare piece of rain gear. What I brought for rain gear was too improvised or looked like it was rescued from the river. As it happened, the rain held off, and the humidity made wearing rain gear a handicap which put away our first water break. A breeze settled down out of the northwest. The clouds lifted to a low ceiling and stayed there. The river was wide under the Newburgh-Beacon Bridge. A tug pushing a raft of a dozen Buchanan barges loaded with trap rock yesterday steadily advanced to take the lead over our moving position.

Following a brief reconnoiter at Denning Point, once a Native American burial ground, we passed under Mount Beacon on which huge signal fires were lit during the Revolutionary War, then made a far to near approach onto the improbable sight of Bannerman Castle. The Castle has a story book appearance with crenulated walls rising from water level to heights accentuated by an equally incredulous fjord like background. Dan did his level best while afloat to explain how this fairy tale of a place, once an arsenal now abandoned, came to be. We were entering into a very interesting stretch of the river.

If GHRP history was to repeat itself the staff had serially and seriously warned us of the eventuality of squaring off in a water fight in Cold Spring against local well wishers also in kayaks. One precaution was to be sure not to suck up sand when arming your siphon pump turned water gun. Other than that everything else would be fair game. This year however, the water gun match didn't take place. We won by default.

Little Stony Point (east bank) juts out into the river from shore like a skeg on the bottom centerline of a kayak. Dwarfed by the surrounding landscape it felt exotic. A sloping sandy beach reaching up to a high canopy of trees on the upland lent it a Paradise Island atmosphere. The air of mysteriousness was reinforced in coming upon rugged handmade wooden boats hauled up on the beach, cantered over on their beams.

Our turn inshore signaled an intention to land so a group of young African Americans from Hunts Point (Bronx, NYC) rallied near the water to give us an enthusiastic, well executed welcome that would have fired up the home team in any stadium. That's how we learned these kids were "Rocking the Boat", a non-profit organization that teaches teens how to build then use traditional wooden boats. The boats are fashioned in the Whitehall gig style, some stepped with a stub mast, resembling those used in the 1800s to ferry people to and from ships in New York Harbor. "Rocking the Boat" was waiting for the tide to journey north. Our visit was short, Cold Spring lay just beyond this Point.

As we paddled closer into shore at Cold Spring my level of excitement jumped as I positively identified two folks on shore waiting for our arrival. I was going to be a host in the rough, pal around with familiar company for a day, and share the adventure. John and Vinnie were college buddies. In those days our circle of friends regularly absorbed tonic Hudson River scenes from the campus of Mount Saint Vincent in Riverdale, NY. On occasion we would spirit ourselves away over the George Washington Bridge to the lookouts on the Palisades. John and I go back to grammar and high school in East Flatbush, Kings County, and summers at Breezy Point, Queens. Breezy Point would be the very last piece of NY state to pass by at the end of this Hudson River watercourse if the route south followed its ancient channel bed to the sea.

John and Vinnie had toured West Point, just around the bend, across the river. They had first watched for our group's approach from the exposed spine of rock between the Catskill Aqueduct structure and Breakneck Ridge.

Setting up tent this afternoon was a minor exhibition as it showed off just how humbly the group begins the other half of the day on the paddle. There was nothing humble in the setting though, Storm King wore a cloak of heavy clouds right in front of us. Scott commented earlier that this part of the river is the most photographed Hudson River scene.

I would have enjoyed hearing Jonathan Kruk tell a local tale or two after he stumped around introducing himself at the camp site as "the storyteller", and he did look the part. In loquacious stage fashion he described the head of his walking stick as having the ears of a bat, the eyes of a fox, and the beak of a bird, or some such combination. He got hold of one's imagination. Jonathan as storyteller was scheduled to be part of the Cold Spring celebration at the Foundry Cafe'.

My visitors and I had too much to catch up on. We traveled back to the outcropping just north of the Route 9D tunnel under the ridge for a view. As we watched the sloop Clearwater just managed to catch enough wind to make its way up the narrows between Storm King and Breakneck Ridge. We walked Main Street to settle into the comfy sitting room at the Hudson House for a spell. Newly recognizable landscapes of the fabled local stretch of river and of classic steamships such as the Mary Powell hung in paintings on the walls. Acting on a suggestion we had a memorable dinner at The Tavern located on the edge of a fairway and under the distant pinnacle of Osborne Castle in Garrison.

Friday, August 14

The eastward facing slope of Storm King was glistening wet in the early morning light. A long CSX freight train snaked along under the mountain's ramparts making its way north in muted rumbles. A tug passed south. Wayne found me off in a corner of the campsite finishing up morning dental hygiene. Wayne's appearance was another fortuitous rendezvous. His chance mentioning the Great Hudson River Paddle in conversation two years ago got me where I was today. Another John, his brother-in-law and my good neighbor back in Hinesburg, VT, being one in the same, loaned the kayak that made my participation in the paddle a reality.

Although Wayne has a selection of kayaks of his own at home, including those he built, he was to paddle one belonging to the Hudson River Valley Outfitters today. The Outfitters deployed a squadron of VIP kayakers, including the Sullivan family, to accompany us on the morning leg to Manitou. Wayne lives in Newburgh, had worked at West Point, is presently employed at one of the Danskammer power stations, and knew the run of the river we were about to embark on. With him I had a one-on-one tour guide passing Constitution Island, West Point, the perilous deep of World's End, and everything significant in between, all the way down to Manitou.

Wayne and I shared occupational backgrounds working in power plants, as IBEW union members, and as power company employees. On first blush this might not sound compatible with environmental protection, however, across the spectrum of power company employees, we as they, are far from guilt by association to perceptions. That's saying a mouthful in the shadow of Storm King.

Interestingly enough, the hamlet of Hinesburg, VT, had a local son who figured prominently in the precedent setting federal appeals court decision that led to the undoing of Con Edison's plans to mar Storm King with a pumped storage power facility. As legacy shows this controversy waged back and forth in New York in the 1960's and 70's before the court's decision became a corner stone in environmental regulatory law and an early victory in the environmental movement. In 1961 Charles Ross was one of five members on the Federal Power Commission. His lone written dissent was adopted by the court helping to reverse the commission's approval of the project.

I had the pleasure of kibitzing with one of the other VIPs on our course to Manitou. In the morning circle Fran Dunwell was introduced as Coordinator of the NYS DEC Hudson River Estuary Program. As natural science was still a personal passion, just a road not taken, I was curious to ask Fran if she knew or heard of a few people that I formerly knew as being associated with Hudson River issues in the 1970's.

“Yes”, she heard of Dom Pirone, my college ecology teacher, and added that she read of Dom in Robert Boyle's 1979 book, The “Hudson River: A Natural and Unnatural History”. As I remember Dom had a role or an affiliation with the Hudson River Fisherman's Association.

While Dom's notoriety was a revelation little did I realize Fran herself was an author. I later discovered a theme related ad in the fall “Hudson River Valley Review”, Autumn 2008, for the book, “The Hudson America's River” by Frances F. Dunwell. Fran's previous book is “Hudson River Highlands”.

At Manitou Point now we were milling about like water boatman in our kayaks while folks said goodbyes to friends and day paddlers when a low flying jet heading north popped into view over our heads. In military parlance the aircraft was “jinking” side to side and one could assume people on this corporate jet were sightseeing. However, the wide and thin red sash around the forward fuselage announced US Coast Guard. This was not a Learjet but a HU-25 Guardian medium range surveillance aircraft. One guide volunteered the surveillance flight up the Hudson is conducted every day.

Leaving Manitou, very close to the Putnam and Westchester County line now, we crossed channel to the west side. There in all their glory was Anthony's Nose, Bear Mountain Bridge, and the Highlands. At Popolopen Creek we ducked under a timber trussed railroad bridge and came to rest in close surroundings under a miniature scale suspension footbridge within Bear Mountain State Park. Lunch time included easy access to a new facility with exhibits at the Fort Montgomery Visitors Center. [“...The fort fell to the British on October 6, 1777. Nonetheless, the battles disrupted Sir Henry Clinton's attempt to relieve Burgoyne's army that was trapped at Saratoga...”].

The second half of our 14 mile paddle from Cold Spring to Stony Point began by passage under the high flying span of the Bear Mountain Bridge, seemingly bowed to mimic the curvature of the earth, and entry into a run of the river hiding fewer nooks and crannies while giving away to broad features measured in miles. One's own center of gravity felt like a heat source. As convincing as the comment sounded I did not believe the elevated water temperatures close to touch was due solely to the cooling water discharge of the Indian Point Nuclear Generating Station on this run of the river.

Better than a good mile or more north of Stony Point, off Tomkins Cove, about that time in the afternoon when one's energy begins to flag, a loud report followed by a ballooning puff of white smoke drifting away from the headland in front of us centered attention. That signal could only have been a cannon shot (come to find out later – from a six pounder), although we were too far away to visibly pinpoint the location of a cannon. No one expected to be splashed by cannon ball, quite to the contrary this welcomed interruption meant someone was on the lookout for our arrival.

Just minutes before skirting under and around the point the obsolete and diminutive 1826 Stony Point Lighthouse came into view ensconced there on top competing with the tree tops for a height advantage. Not at all like Little Stony Point back north which had a sandy beach for a welcome mat, this Stony Point rose out of the water like Gibraltar but is thickly covered with a thin veneer of stubborn brush.

We hugged the rock bastion around to the shallow tidal marsh and reed dominated shoreline obscuring a natural sally port when we were again saluted with arms, only this time we were treated to the slicing sound of musket fire by young volunteers in period garb. In quick succession they reloaded and fired again, then quietly disappeared from the scene before we could say "thank you", their duty done and noted.

The capture of Stony Point by the Americans in the Revolutionary War by surprise was a timely and inspiring success although a short lived occupation. A unique aspect of this engagement follows. "...the Americans began their attack with unloaded muskets and fixed bayonets so that an accidental shot would not reveal their presence and reduce the element of surprise. The attacking soldiers wore pieces of white paper in their hats to avoid confusion in the darkness."

Level ground being of short supply everyone scouted around the top of the Point for a suitable tent site. In the end we were scattered around like sprinkles on an ice cream cone. An open air pavilion became the center of operations for the land crew and meal activities. Once encamped we could wander the historic site at will taking in the static displays, re-enactment setups, and commanding views.

While at Stony Point, if time allowed, I had entertained the idea of finagling a visit to the Bethany Spiritual Center to visit Sister Catherine (cousin) in Highland Mills. For a variety of reasons, two being a personal energy deficit and time, this side trip wasn't in the stars.

As a camp site on the paddle Stony Point was one of a kind for its elevation above sea level. An after dark walk on the wide paths afforded views of twinkling channel lights tracing north into black space and a look across the river to city lights in nearby Verplanck. Only a teasingly cooler breeze could be had on a bench by the lighthouse. Staring south I half expected to see light throw on the sky above NYC or at least to be able to make out the illuminated outline of the Tappan Zee Bridge but darkness in that direction too confirmed we had a ways to go.

Saturday, August 15th

Mark, customary point man on the water and guide extraordinaire, must have drawn the short straw yesterday as he had guard duty last night on the beach with the kayaks, and equipment, while the rest of us camped top side. In that assignment Mark enjoyed a wider variety of biting insects, became somewhat concerned about the snarls of two feuding raccoons outside his tent, and had no volume control knob for the mediocre band playing somewhere over the backwater. Still, he mustered up the pizazz when there was light to select mementos for each us from the inexhaustible supply of flotsam stranded by the tide. These we found resting atop our respective kayaks in the morning ritual of making ready to shove off.

My memento was a handle grip sized cut of brush wood that was meant to pass for a sling shot. As Mark explained, because he often looked over his shoulder to check people's position, I seemingly dashed around within the group on the water between his looking. I'll own up to that. In crew the rule was "keep your boat pointed". Or maybe it was the former Navy in me where there is no such thing as a bump in that service. Always keep you boat headed in the right direction and stay in formation was a challenge when the formation was usually in a boil.

Since Mark's memento to me had one or two prongs more than a sling shot I fancied it differently. One way it could resemble the intricate business end of an Eskimo's fish spear which added credence to the novel concept that I was now "a natural" in a kayak. A third interpretation, that it resembled Neptune's trident, appealed to my seafaring alter ego. Only when Connie, guide and the group's on water medical advisor, reminded me on those special occasions that I held my paddle upside down, not backwards at least, was I comfortable with just slingshot.

We shoved off and started slowly, scaring a few carp from the submerged grass beds, and received a wing wave from a resident osprey. The plan was to proceed down the west side of Haverstraw Bay. The heat, moderated by a slight breeze, was addressed with a generous number of water stops and wet downs. This would be a typical hot hazy August day. Our first "out of boat" experience meant pulling up onto a clear water, stone bottom beach for a dip at the foot of the most northerly escarpment of the Palisades. The looming cliffs humbled us at the base, with no sign of human disturbance in sight the effect felt like sanctuary. The Palisades High Tor's 820 foot peak was somewhere up, over, and beyond the great wall.

We did stick to the west shore, lucky to pick up breezes here and there. At water level the air cleared while the headlands remained hazed. Positively identifying points of interest across Haverstraw Bay was a tossup. We continued south sidling along under the rim of the Palisades. Birds of prey too high up to be recognized lofted on updrafts and trailed their shadows across the blank sheer walls. Meanwhile Mark shared as many historical anecdotes as he could. We did manage to catch a veiled glimpse at Sing-Sing and he did point in the direction of Croton Point, the site of the annual mid-June Clearwater Festival. This past May Pete Seeger celebrated his 90th birthday with a fund raising concert at Madison Square Garden.

We paused at Nyack's waterfront Memorial Park for lunch. Heat trapping concrete, asphalt, and the built environment was fast becoming the norm along the shore. Grateful for shade under the roof of a park pavilion and better than average restrooms we quickly departed Nyack to later slip between Piers 94 and 95 of the elevated west side approach to the Tappan Zee Bridge. Passing this demarcation we then lined up for an extended channel crossing. Once on the east shore we promptly cooled our heels and everything else in the water near Irvington Yacht Club. Paddling what little distance remained to the town's Scenic Hudson Park was perfunctory. We hauled the boats up the park's concrete ramp and made camp. The park was well used by members of the community and here, of all the sites below New Baltimore, curious park patrons asked the most questions about our presence and the program. Of course, the population density was higher.

An evening stroll led me north along the bulkhead promenade in the direction of the bustling Red Hat Restaurant. Sitting on a riverside bench this evening one could count the lights of the Tappan Zee Bridge just to the north. Looking south from the same spot the lights of the George Washington Bridge glimmered faintly. Just half a league remained for me to go beyond the Zee.

Sunday, August 16

Sleep should have been easier in a town named after Washington Irving, author of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820), although Irvington essentially lies on the edge of the burgeoning metropolis. The morning began with French toast, fruit salad, and the saying of many goodbyes to new friends and Hudson River mates. I asked a number of the guides who contributed to the Hudson River Water Trail guidebook to autograph my copy purchased at Norrie earlier in the summer. The run to Yonkers would be the shortest of the trip and the last stop for me.

Tomorrow the paddlers of the Champlain-Hudson River 2009 Paddle would celebrate reaching the end point at Pier 96, 56th Street in Manhattan. And tomorrow Vermont would celebrate Bennington Battle Day, a state holiday which came with time off and a chance to recoup. In my youth I worked at the Starrett-Lehigh Building at West 26th Street on the waterfront during school vacations, 1968 through 1974. In those years lunch was often consumed on the roof affording an infinite number of Hudson River views inspiring random thoughts of wanderlust on a sea that gathers to a great river and how those waters course north. Who was to know the real experience would be by kayak and paddling south?

Andrew of the land crew hosed down each of the kayakers leaving the ramp at Irvington with fresh water. A mom and daughter joined the group as "day paddlers" this morning. A spate of well wishers again came out from shore to greet us on the journey south. The pull of the outgoing tide was as good as a tow now. Dobbs Ferry came and went. Approaching Yonkers seeing fewer Eagles gave way to seeing more Osprey. Three huge tug and barge combinations were riding high and empty in a mid-river anchorage. Our arrival at the Beczak Environmental Education Center coincided with the conclusion of the morning's seining session.

On approach younger children unfurled their project that read "Welcome Paddlers". Yonkers was Jack's country. Earlier he pointed out where he lived as we floated by. The Yonkers Paddling and Rowing Club ramp lied next door to Beczak. Kevin, the good son that he is, was on shore awaiting our arrival. We loaded up the pickup to return north via the Taconic. Reservations at the Holiday Inn in Fishkill weren't necessary. We made it back to Hinesburg by nightfall, mission complete, a humble accomplishment in lieu of our great natural world, in the wake of the great sea voyagers of 400 years ago, and in regard of the continuing great Hudson River story.

Thank you, Hudson River Valley Greenway!

Sincerely,

Roger Donegan