



The Sycamore Islander

October 1999

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Fall Workfest : Start planning now.

Get your calendar out, and note in the November 20 slot that you are going to have a big day at the club. Oh, the delicious anticipation of raking leaves, moving docks, and other gainful exercise... reason enough. But when you combine the activity with comradeship and a potluck feast, you have a day to remember.

Those who have participated in the past know to bring the tools needed to perform their specialty upkeep and repair skills. For many, this means rakes, and there can't be too many of these. In fact, the late November date corresponds to a time when the lawn will be covered deeply in sycamore and oak leaves.

October Meeting

The September Meeting continued the debate for a more canoe-oriented membership and dissolved into the creation of an ad-hoc committee to come up with some proposals. The hit of the night was Renee Dunham's slide show of her guided Maine canoe trip earlier this summer. Looked like a lot of fun!

The October Meeting will be held on the Island October 13th at 8:00 pm. The agenda is open and as always, all members are encouraged to come and join the discussion (even if it is only to be able to say someday that you attended a meeting in the 1900s!!).

September 8, 1999 Minutes

Attendance: John Stapko, Ann Marie Cunningham, Peggy Thomson, Johnna Robinson, Maxine Hattery, Betty Burchell, Trip Reid, George and Marcia Loeb, George and Renee Dunham, John Matthews, Tryon Wells, Nancy and Ralph Bower, Jane and David Winer, Gerald Barton.

President Tryon Wells called the meeting to order at 7:45 pm.

Treasurer's Report: Treasurer Johnna Robinson reported that so far for the year the club is living within its means, however, the club is looking for a new supplier for the caretaker's workman's compensation.

The Sycamore Islander is a monthly newsletter of the Montgomery Sycamore Island Club. Articles, photographic essays, drawings, announcements, letters to the editors-any materials of interest to the membership and waiting list-are welcome and should be sent to the Editors, Jane and David Winer, 5927 Onondaga Road, Bethesda, MD 20816. Text and graphics may be sent as email attachments to davidwiner@erols.com in all common formats. The deadline for inclusion in a particular issue is receipt at the Editors' address ten days prior to the second-Wednesday monthly meeting of the club. **Earlier submissions can be expected to have priority.**

The Islander: Correction to large party announcement: Betty Burchell's party date is October 9, not September 29.

Caretaker's Report: Doc plans to reseed the grass. The light illuminating the trail to the Parkway went out in one of the thunder storms and will be repaired. Kudzu, poison ivy, and nettle on the Island are controlled by spraying. Kudzu is also growing on Rupert's Island, which is designated a natural area by Club consensus. However, Kudzu is an exotic plant. Doc has investigated and is of the opinion that spraying is the only effective way of control as it kills the roots.

Old Business: The canoe competency proposal published by George Loeb in the August Islander was discussed at length. Three separate but related issues seemed to arise out of the discussion: water safety, reviving the sense of a canoe culture in the club, and the management of canoe use during large parties. George Loeb's proposal will be modified to address these issues and will again be published in the Islander. A committee of David Winer, George Loeb, Blair Bower and Ann-Marie Cunningham will propose a set of rules for the use of club canoes which will be offered to the Island membership for voting.

Club Member Dies: A member reported receiving notice that long-time member Horace Custis has died and willed \$500 to the Club. The Custis family have been members "from the beginning."

Water Levels at Sycamore: Gerald Barton, who works for the U.S. Geological Survey, passed around some interesting printouts from the NOAA Website -- graphs and charts of weather information and water levels over the years. Tryon Wells observed from one graph that the river had been higher longer in the past 4 or so years than at any other time this century, the summer drought notwithstanding. The link to this Website is available from the Sycamore Island Website.

Another Bell: An additional bell is to be acquired. It will be positioned to ring on the Virginia side of the Island so that it can be heard near the swimming floats.

Books in the clubhouse: Maps and books donated to the Club are available in the Clubhouse. Doc reported that families occasionally come to spend a rainy day in the Clubhouse. These materials may be a pleasant rainy (and sunny) day resource.

Who's a Star? Doc reported that the Discovery Channel filmed a scene on the Island in which John Matthews appeared as a French trapper.

Workfest Date Set: The date for the fall workfest was set for Saturday, November 20. The rain date is the following day.

Regatta: Jane Winer officially thanked Marcia and George Loeb for doing the Regatta again this year, making it the fourth consecutive year for this event. Over 60 people participated, including an abundance of youngsters. Marcia announced that prizes not picked up for the games will be distributed at the workfest.

New Trees: A motion was made and unanimously passed to give Trip Reid authority to purchase and plant five trees on the Island. We will protect volunteer tree growth as well as the new ones.

Construction: There is concern about large-scale construction on the Virginia shore, just downstream from the Island. This will be investigated.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:30 pm. For those who stayed, Renee Dunham showed slides of a guided canoe trip in the Northwoods of Maine.

Next Meeting: The October meeting will be on the 13th on the Island.

—Renee Dunham, Recording Secretary

New Treasurer Needed!

The current Treasurer is going on to different fields, so Sycamore will need a new one in 2000. It's a really interesting job since you are involved in most club activities and tasks. It takes about an hour a month plus meetings. In January, reports add about two hours and in November a budget committee works out the next year's plans. The Treasurer only spends money, about ten checks per month; all incoming funds are received and deposited in the bank by the Financial Secretary.

It's a great way to make a contribution to the club and watch events from a unique angle. Call me if you have any questions.

—Johnna Robinson, (301) 229-5421

Obituary

Horace Hatch Custis, 87, a retired Washington physician, died of heart disease June 22 at Sibley Memorial Hospital. -- *Washington Post, June 25, 1999*

My Memories of the Custis Family

When I joined Sycamore, in the late fifties, the Custis family formed a strong contingent of active members, consisting of the senior Dr. Custis and his wife, four of their five sons and their families. They appeared separately and together. On Sundays their picnic table consisted of many tables strung together lengthwise down the main stretch of lawn about half-way between the ferry landing and the opposite shore of the Island.

Dr. Horace was the oldest brother; Norment, Snowden, and Gregg predeceased him. We knew their families well. Norment's wife, Helen, has also died. The youngest brother, Robert, is the only one surviving. He seldom showed up at the Island.

Whenever there was work to be done there were Custis family members around. Also if there were fun events they participated. Perhaps Horace was a little quieter than the others, and Snowden a little noisier. But all told they contributed a good spirit to Sycamore Island.

--Betty Burchell

A Call to Fem-Kayakers

Over the past year, I have learned that there are a few more than a few of us women who would be on the river more often if there were the safety of company. There are also some who would like to slip into a kayak and give it a first time try. I am addressing women simply because - coincidence or not - it has been mostly women who have expressed this interest to me. So I propose that we start with a roster. Call me if you are interested in paddling with someone, trying out the kayak feel, or teaching others what you know. We'll take it from there.

—Renee Dunham (202) 686-6451

Ruppert



Cartoon by Johnna Robinson

The Sycamore Store

Historical Note by Sherry Pettie



The Sycamore Store as we know it today.

Have you ever wondered about the Sycamore Store? I used to pass it by without taking any notice at all. Then about ten years ago, on a drive out MacArthur Boulevard to deliver my son to a violin lesson he was anxious to delay, he noticed the store and insisted on stopping. We bought a coke and some chips and looked at the many empty shelves. "There must be a history behind this place!" we told each other back in the car. We found the store a bit mysterious but very charming, and made sure to stop in each week on our way to the violin lesson -- a short-lived routine, as these things often turn out.

I've been curious about the Sycamore Store ever since, and thus was delighted when editor Dave Winer asked me to write this article for *The Islander*. It gave an excuse to poke around, ask questions, and discover what connection might exist between the store and our club.

At first, I imagined that researching this article would simply mean driving up to the store, going in, and interviewing someone inside for a few minutes. So the first thing I discovered is that the store is actually closed -- not just for the afternoon as the signs and seasonal window displays suggest, but closed for good! The next thing I learned, when I appealed to Doc for ideas on what to do next, is that the owners of the Sycamore Store, George H. and Louise Rogers, are the parents of our own club member George W. Rogers!

George W. told me that he grew up in the house alongside the store and spent every summer of his childhood on the river. He first went to Sycamore Island as the guest of legendary caretaker Frank Davis, who had befriended him on regular visits to the store for supplies. Later George worked for a couple of years as one of the teenage Saturday caretakers that the club used to hire in those days.

Weekend responsibilities back then entailed more than simply running the ferry. Mr. Davis would have a list of additional chores to keep you busy, like mopping floors and cutting grass. George also worked in the family store, and he saved up his money to buy a motor boat -- the only one at the island. It came in handy when Betty Burchell discovered ancient artifacts of nomadic river Indians on Rupperts Island in 1968. An American University anthropology class set up a dig and hired George to ferry their equipment back and forth from the landing steps.

George H. Rogers also kindly told me a little about the store and his own history. He grew up in the neighborhood, too, in Glen Echo Heights, and first started working in the Sycamore Store as a teenager. With the exception of a few years away in World War II, Mr. Rogers worked at the store starting in 1935, and has owned it since 1953.

He bought the store from Hugh "Boots" Johnston, who had first opened it in 1919. Boots' son Mickey Johnston, who owns Surburban Florist in Bethesda, reports that his father was a member of the Sycamore Island club for many, many years. When I looked through our club records for some mention of the store's inception, I found only an indication in meeting minutes of June 9, 1919, that Johnston's energies had turned that year to a new endeavor. The record states "the chair accepted with deep regret the resignation of Mr. H. B. Johnston only that a new captain of the island be appointed."

Mr. Rogers also told me that, before buying the store, he lived in a house just on the other side of the trolley car tracks -- one of a row of ten or twelve houses

strung along at that time between the tracks and the canal. (The tracks of course are gone now, but you can spot their location from the old wooden bridge just down the path from our parking lot on MacArthur.)

I became curious about the rather heavy settlement right at this intersection of MacArthur and Walhonding, and learned that it most likely first started in the late 1880s when the Glen Echo Electric Railroad was built to run trolley cars down from a



Before supermarkets, stores like this served the community for groceries. The Sycamore Store delivery truck is at left.
—Early photo, courtesy of the Rogers family

station at Wisconsin and Willard Avenues. The tracks came down the hill along Walhonding, and the stop was called Glen Echo Junction then. Everyone would climb into horse-drawn wagons and ride the rest of the way to Glen Echo park for the Chautauqua. By the turn of the century, the Washington and Great Falls Electric Railway company had built a line out from Georgetown along the Potomac palisades to Cabin John creek. When a new Glen Echo station opened down the line where the amusement park had



An earlier practice continues: decorating the front window by season.

replaced the Chautauqua, the name of our stop was changed to Sycamore Station.

From the 1920s, the Sycamore Store was one of several thriving groceries up and down MacArthur Boulevard, called Conduit Road at that time. There were several stores in the District, and also in Glen Echo and Cabin John. (The one in Cabin John is still open and now called Captain's Market.) The real heyday for these stores was 1935-1955, when there were no supermarkets and everyone really depended on their neighborhood grocery. The Sycamore Store sold fresh fruits and vegetables, and custom-butchered meats, provided a delivery service, and had two or three employees.

It remained a full grocery store up into the early 1970s.

From then on into the 1980s, making sandwiches at lunchtime became the biggest part of the business. Mr. Rogers gradually reduced the store's operations over the years, until finally hanging up the "closed" sign for good sometime in 1995. He has no future plans, and believes that anyone wanting to open another store there would run into a zoning problem with the neighbors.

At the end of our conversation, I couldn't help asking Mr. Rogers why he didn't remove the signs. The store looks like it might be open. Doesn't it confuse people? He replied that everyone in the neighborhood knew it was closed, and he hoped that others weren't greatly inconvenienced. Then what he said revealed that the reason was simply nostalgia. "We have no desire to take the sign down. We like it there. It's part of our memories."



Thanks to the Rogers family, Mickey Johnston, local historian William Offutt, the staff of the *Washingtoniana* collection at Martin Luther King Jr. Library, and the Historical Society of Washington, which keeps the archives of the Montgomery Sycamore Island Club.

Sherry Pettie is an active Wait-Lister. Among her volunteer efforts for the club, she graciously responded to our request for this article.