

# *The Sycamore Islander*

August, 2000

Volume 79, No. 8

## **Advance Notice: September 13 -- OLD TIMERS DAY**

Peggy Thomson and I have selected Wednesday, September 13 for this year's Old Timers Day on the Island, with Thursday, September 14 as the rain date. It goes without saying that the usual activities and indulgences will be available, including swimming, as the river should still be quite warm. Come early and/or stay late as the spirit moves, but please bring something for the Pot Luck Lunch, which we hope to begin around noon. For the record, anyone who has been a member for some unspecified number of years automatically qualifies as an "Old Timer." So if you are wondering if you are one, rest assured that we will welcome you as one of us, no questions asked.

—Bill Kugler

## **August Meeting**

The July meeting opened with a fascinating presentation on local river history by Alex McCoy and Betty Burchell. Jerry Barton offered a motion to take the names of applicants who contact the membership secretary *in order* over the course of the year so that as January applications are processed, an order is already established.

The August monthly meeting will be held on **August 9** on Sycamore Island at 8:00 pm. Doc will have the char-grills ready at 7:00. The meeting is expected to handle only routine matters and the motion described above. As August meetings have a reputation for low attendance sometimes resulting in a lack of a quorum, please put this meeting on your calendar so that the club can continue to move forward without delay.

## **Minutes of July 12 Meeting**

**Attendance:** Al Brown, Betty Burchell, James McCoy, Gerald Barton, Jane and David Winer, Trip Reid, Larry Heilman, Caroline Gelb, Nancy and Blair Bower, Renee Dunham, Tryon Wells, John Noble, Peggy Thomson.

The meeting began early, at 7:35 p.m., with a presentation of turn-of-the-former-century, local, recreational, river activity given by Alex McCoy, Al Brown, and Betty Burchell. (Article appears elsewhere in this *Islander*.) It was suggested that the presentation be repeated at the next workfest. For those interested in more local river history, the three volumes of the Sycamore Island Centennial Issue of 1986 are available in the Clubhouse.

The official meeting came to order at 8:17 p.m.

*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 receive priority.**

### Meeting before the Meeting

Peggy Thomson has unearthed a goldmine of historic photos from John's collection. At 7: p.m. (before the August 9 meeting) we will gather around a table to select from these and others that you may bring, with an eye to hanging an exhibit of photographs in the clubhouse.

### Special Safety Notice:

Be advised that the lights on the path above the canal will be out for the August 9 monthly meeting.

## Minutes of June 14 Meeting (continued)

**Communications:** Peggy Thomson distributed the *Washington Post* July 11 article by Angus Phillips describing the serious whitewater canoeing accident experienced by our Sycamore Island Club member Star Mitchell. She is fortunately alive and recovering from a broken neck after flipping and hitting a rock head on in class IV rapids on Virginia's Cheat River.

**The Islander:** Jane Winer requested that we keep this publication interesting with more articles and photos, etc. from our readers.

**Grounds Report:** Trip Reid reports that the five Black Willows planted on the upstream end of the Island are surviving. Also, a wildflower book has been added to the Clubhouse library.

**Old business:** Gerald Barton proposed a by-laws change relating to new applicants: "People requesting membership may do so at any time of the year. The sequence of requests will determine the order of admission when written applications are accepted in January." The motion made, a vote will be taken at the next meeting.

**Report from the Ad Hoc Committee on the Caretakers Quarters:** Tryon Wells reported that the design plans as published in the *July Islander* were accepted by the committee with one exception - the quarters will be wider than shown in the *Islander*. The committee based their planning on clearly defined goals, addressing flood safety, construction quality, and livability. The current caretaker indicated his approval of the current plan.

**New business:** Flood related discussion: Tryon suggested that a broadcast system (automated e-mail) be used to alert members of flooding and request assistance on the Island. Flood statistics are now part of the Sycamore Island Website. John Matthews and Blair Bower are investigating devices to divert the force of flood waters on the upper Island.

Canoe safety: Past president David Lyles has suggested a motion to change the By-laws to enforce safety while using Club canoes (those owned by the Club for general use). A formal motion was not made at the meeting. Be prepared to discuss life-preserver use and supervision of children under 15 at a future meeting. Doc suggested that the Club attorney be consulted about liability.

Caretakers Notes from the Island: In response to Peggy Thomson's suggestion that the Caretakers log be edited and published at the end of the year, it was noted that we need a volunteer to speak for this task.

Large party request: Cecily Abrams, wishing to sponsor a large party of 45 for the Teacher's Association, could not reach the party chairman and desired her request be considered by the Club so that plans could proceed in time for the event. A motion was made and the request was granted after much discussion and a close vote. This reactivated interest and discussion about the Island's position on large parties.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:14 p.m.

— Renee Dunham, Recording Secretary

**Special Notice \*\*\* The Fourteenth Annual Sycamore Regatta \*\*\* Special Notice**

**Saturday, September 2nd, 1:30 to Dusk**

Remember the Regattas of yore...the Round-the-Island Race, the Pickup for Points, the Jump and Dunk, the 3-Legged Race for Landlubbers, the Balloon Stomp, the Raw Egg Toss...we'll do it all again, and more. If the weather holds out, we may even put on the Lance-A-Lot Tournament. Be prepared to bring your full pot for the potluck feast after the race when we announce the winners and give out the prizes. Drinks will be provided.

We can't do it all alone. Would you like to be a race monitor? A setter-upper? A skill demonstrator? Help is needed! This is your big chance! Please call George and Marcia Loeb at 301-652-4229 right away! Wait-listers,

## **Minutes of Sycamore Island Ad-Hoc Quarters Addition Committee, July 11**

**Attendance:** John and Abigail Wiebenson, John Matthews, Alan Gelb, Mardy Burgess, Tryon Wells, Trip Reid

The "open-house" meeting on the scope and details of the project to build an addition to the caretaker's quarters began a few minutes after 8pm and continued on until about 10pm. Many details were discussed and debated.

### **The group agreed on 6 goals for the project:**

1. Move the bedroom and kitchen of the caretaker's quarters to a higher elevation so that in the event of floods, disruption to the caretaker's living situation is considerably reduced.
2. Make the caretaker's quarters attractive enough not only for our current caretaker, but also for potential future caretakers.
3. Be sure that the space requirements are sufficient for a caretaker's spouse or partner who may work out of the quarters on a full or part-time basis.
4. Ensure that the construction is good enough to survive floods and not have to be re-done.
5. Ensure that it is a healthy space.
6. Stay within the \$31,000 agreed upon at the July member meeting.

**Minor Changes:** Those present agreed on a number of minor changes to John Wiebenson's drawings as they appeared in last month's Islander.

1. Extend the upstream wall of the addition 2 to 3 feet.
2. Extend the wall facing the maple tree 2 feet or as

close to it as possible.

3. Within these additions, extra closed space can be added in the bedroom on the bathroom wall, allowing for a washer/dryer and more closet space; that whole wall would have extra closet space.

**Kitchen and Bedroom:** Though not unanimous, the majority of those present agreed that the disposition of the current kitchen and bedroom of the caretaker's quarters should be:

1. The current kitchen space on the ground floor would continue to be heated and could serve as a sitting room, more living room, or office.
2. The current bedroom would no longer be heated but could act as a storage area for the caretaker.

### **Other Suggestions:**

1. Put in narrow horizontal windows high on the outside wall in the old kitchen area to let in light and yet retain privacy.
2. The construction partnership might be "John & John" (Matthews & Wiebenson).
3. Use casement windows.

### **Questions yet to be decided:**

1. Where the stairs would be. The current caretaker prefers that the stairs not take more space out of the living room area.
2. Is there space in the new kitchen area for a dishwasher?

— Mardy Burgess, Acting Recording Secretary

# Lightning!

--by Sue, Greg, and James Super

We should have realized that June 17 would not be ordinary. First the original plan for the day went awry. Having made reservations weeks earlier for a family picnic on Sycamore Island, when the date drew closer and we called to confirm the event with Greg's relatives, none of them could make it. So we turned to plan B, inviting other friends for an impromptu barbecue picnic and ending up with a smaller

and Mark Dorfman, too. After that, we stopped keeping track of even more coincidences that kept accumulating....

Despite the heat and humidity, there was cool shade on the float by the river and we had a wonderful time sharing Sycamore Island with our friends. With several experienced paddlers in the group, we took out two canoes and observed happily as ominous clouds stayed well east and south of the island. Conditions continued to be lovely until after dinner, when Doc came out to warn us that the television weather reports showed thunder storms approaching from the west. Two couples decided to depart then, while the rest of us lingered to enjoy the view from the porch until rain drove us inside for some old-fashioned matches of ping-pong and pool. The rain was heavy at times, but there was surprisingly little thunder and lightning, so we were totally unprepared for the sudden, deafening crash and flash of lightning striking on the



**Before the storm, conditions on the river were great for canoeing. Guests Floyd Thompson, with daughters Heather and Becca give it a try.**

—Photo Sue Super

but very congenial group of 13 (8 grownups and 5 teens--of whom 3 were 13!) -- not counting the geese, who joined the party later.

Rest assured, we're not superstitious and didn't attach any significance to that number. However, we were taken aback when we started introductions as our guests arrived and realized that all three of the women were named Linda (Steve and Linda Ward, Floyd and Linda Thompson, and Eric and Linda Feldman). if the other couple we called had been able to make it, we would have been joined by Lynn McLeod



**All afternoon the storms kept to the south and east of Sycamore Island, creating dramatic lighting effects on the river as a backdrop for this Canada Goose and giving us some forewarning of what was to come.**

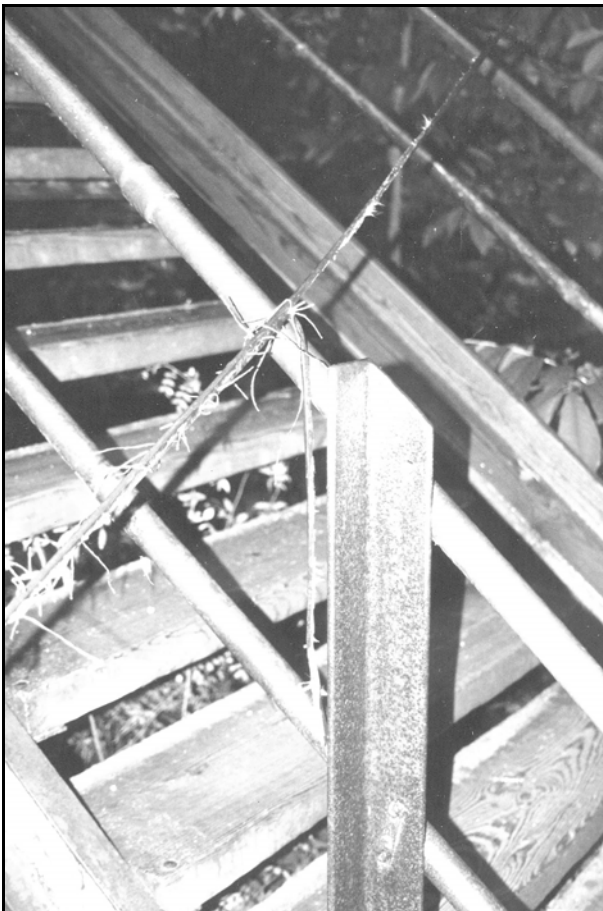
—Photo Sue Super



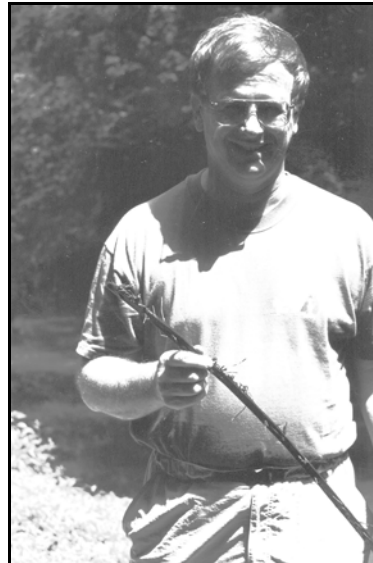
Some time after the lightning strike across the canal, we figured it was safe to leave and found evidence of the bolt in a dramatically frayed telephone line draped across the towpath. From left: Sue Super, Doc Taliaferro, Nick Wing, James Super, Andrew Lund, Linda Ward.  
—photo Greg Super



The lightning left a noticeable scar on the tree that was hit. Shreds of bark were scattered along the footpath below, along with pieces of the equipment that had been attached to the wires.  
—photo Sue Super



We were grateful that no one was on the footbridge or the footpath when the lightning struck the tree and lines.  
—photo Greg Super



Greg couldn't resist getting a sample of the telephone line, which he shared with Phyllis and Doc.  
—photo Sue Super

hillside just across the canal. A couple of us literally jumped out of our chairs to the floor until we realized what had happened. Steve said it sounded like being on an artillery range again in the army. Spotting the smoking tree on the hillside, we ventured outside and met Doe and Phyllis who described their harrowing experience when the “bolt out of the blue” (which Doc described in the July Sycamore Islander) shot out of the wall, fried their computer and fax, and tripped all the downstairs breakers. All was quiet again after that one bolt, but it took some time before we were comfortable enough to make the ferry crossing. There we encountered the frayed, exploded phone line across the towpath and played detective tracing the path of the lightning as we climbed the footpath.

## Notes from the Island

**Mon 12 Jun** Before 0800 hrs this morning it was positively sultry down here... no breeze and the temp and the dew point must have been close... and thoughts of air conditioning were followed by the conviction it would be a terrible day if such thoughts came so early. Yet barely an hour and a half later the wind had picked up and switched to the Northwest, dropping the humidity noticeably. Living close to the out-of-doors causes one to become finely tuned to subtleties of the wind... just another of those things our DNA is programmed to notice but has become lost in our recently urbanized culture as we race from air conditioned box to air conditioned box. We have severed our cultural ties to the wind and hardly ever notice it unless it is dramatically "in our face" in some way. I also wonder the extent to which this is increasingly a generational thing. In West Texas the wind is an ever-present component of the environmental and cultural landscape, and it seems to me that every time my Mother walks outside she instinctively takes note of the wind direction. Yet I suspect that even in West Texas the only people who have been born after air conditioning who are personally attuned to the wind are either farmers or ranchers or someone who has recently gotten dust in his eye. As Nature increasingly disappears from our daily lives we are required to make ever-greater efforts in order to connect with it and appreciate it. Hence the "specialness" of Sycamore Island and the important responsibility of "stewardship" all Members share.

**Thu 15 Jun** As the water level has slowly dropped toward its summer levels the two small rock out-croppings have appeared in the middle of the river where the rock ridge runs down the middle. These are favored perches for the great blue herons we have in such abundance, and it is not infrequent to see both rocks occupied at the same time. It would seem to be pretty barren hunting but recently water willow grass has appeared around them to give some grazing and cover for small fish. A smallish crow (young?) left his perch high in the tree above the captain's float and flew out over the river, where he managed to hover briefly like a harrier, and then reached down to the water's surface to pick up what appeared to be a small dead fish floating there. He then flew on and out to one of the out-croppings to dine. It was so daintily done... no osprey or eagle could have exhibited more grace and economy of movement, and I am not sure I ever seen any birds but the herons use those out-

croppings. It seemed like such astonishingly un-crow-like behaviour, but then their ingenuity and diversity are legend.

**Sat 8 Jul** Yesterday, after delivering folks on the ferry to the towpath... the Caretaker turned to pull back to the Island and almost stepped off the ferry into the river!! Now it is true that a firm grip on the rope meant that only a foot got wet... and it happened so quickly that most (but not all) of the crowd did not notice... but there it is... after all the joking and comments to little children not to walk off the end of the ferry it was the pro himself who (almost) took a fall. It is also an important reminder how important it is that everyone pays attention while on the ferry... and it especially calls up the fact that a previous caretaker did in fact drown while operating the ferry.

But most embarrassing is the admission the Caretaker must make that this month's Notes From the Island in the Islander [*July*] was in fact the wrong file sent to the Editor and not the Notes as written. It is true that reminiscences and observations have found their way into the Caretaker's Log on the web page and hence into the Notes... but the primary purpose of the Caretaker's Log is to function much as a ship's log or facility incident report... recording things broken or fixed or otherwise requiring official notice be taken. Prior to each monthly meeting the Caretaker's Log is culled for all "official" entries and this report is sent to all Officers and Supervisors of the Club. Thus it was not meant that Members should read of our tribulations in this month's Notes... it was this officer's report that was sent by error to the Editor. It can only be claimed that a borrowed and unfamiliar computer is being used while we still await the repair of the Caretaker's computer... but there is really no excuse.

**Mon 10 Jul** Over the Weekend Alex McCoy has installed a river aquarium in the upstairs reading room. He has filled it with aquatic plants and small fish from the river... sort of a living snapshot of the habitat and denizens of the riverbank. It is a great delight of little children to come down and look at the fish from the Captain's float, but there are times of high water or following the rains when the water is too cloudy and murky for much to be seen. Now they can at least go upstairs during these times and see the habitat in clear water. The concept, installation, and stocking were entirely at the initiative of Alex, who is seventeen.

## Notes from the Island

**Wed 12 Jul** Fisherpersons might like to know that it is reported by the Potomac Conservancy that in late April biologists caught shad in the Great Falls area for the first time since 1949, proving that the newly installed fish ladder does work. Presumably these are fish that were released by students and biologists at Angler's Inn four years ago.

**Mon 17 Jul** Unfortunately, congruent with lots of lush is lots of bugs and spiders. We are sad to report that on the ferry this weekend it was discovered that a guest had a tick... a large tick that could be seen by all. At least it was not a tiny deer tick of the kind that can carry Lyme disease, but nonetheless it means that for the first time since we have been here we cannot give a negative answer to the often asked question about whether or not ticks have been reported.

**Fri 21 Jul** Looking out the window over the first coffee at around 0800 hrs a six-point buck and his doe were seen sneaking their way down-Island through the underbrush. It was a great show, as they could be observed with anonymous comfort from our "tree house" living room. They did not cross the ferry rope near the walkway, but after hanging out there for a while, walked back towards the top of the Island on the paths as though satisfied they had the Island to themselves. We imagined them hiding out for the day at the top of the Island, but a guest of John Krasny reported seeing the same couple at the Parkway parking lot at 1000 hrs, so clearly they were swimming rivers and climbing hills and covering ground in daylight.

**Sat 22 Jul** Our own Phil Thorson has decided to attempt to do something about the kudzu that is killing so many trees along MacArthur Blvd. and the canal. His investigations have revealed that various official entities are aware of the problem but are stymied by official reluctance to use herbicides on the kudzu. Phil spoke to Matt Barres of the Potomac Conservancy who turned out to be an information fount and indicated that the Park Service has newly appointed Susan Albert to supervise the removal of exotic invasive plants in the area, and that kudzu and oriental bittersweet are at the top of the list. There are many Club Members who delight in the plants of the natural habitat near the Island... and one cannot help but wonder if they could be motivated to provide a

pool of labor to gather when the time and project are set and contribute to the effort. This has got to be the sort of project that would interest school age Members to help, as they often seem more conscious of the needs of the natural environment.

**Tue 25 Jul** Around midnight last night sounds in the screen porch were investigated and a "huge" raccoon was found to be sorting through the metal trash can there. The raccoon was reportedly not only extremely large but lighter in color than usual... in fact a sort of tan hue. The word "reportedly" must be used here because the source here is the Caretaker's Wife. You husbands know this type of incident... it usually begins with a comment such as "No dear, I am sure the sound is nothing, probably just the cats" and concludes with pithy comments from the Wife about how the partner who is supposed to be the protector cowered in his warm bed while the woman had to go confront dangerous noises in the night. You can be sure the Caretaker had harsh words with the watch-cats the next morning.

**Thu 27 Jul** Yesterday while walking into the screen porch and past the metal garbage can a squirrel shot out of it and streaked away under the far door... scaring the dickens out of your poor Caretaker. As the day before was the "huge raccoon" event, an investigation of the contents seemed in order. Sure enough, Members or their guests have been naughty... extremely naughty... in avoiding their responsibilities about taking garbage up the hill. So let's be clear... the metal can (w/o a lid) is solely for members to have a place to put "trash" they may have picked up around the island. It is not a receptacle for "garbage" or the food remains of your picnic dinners or snacks. I suppose this is the place to mention that this year there has been a steady increase in the amount of garbage left on the island, especially inexcusable, as the wet weather has meant less traffic. This phenomena is "country club creep," unsuitable for a Club with a long co-op tradition.

—Doc Taliaferro

*Excerpted from the Caretaker's Log at  
<http://www.sycamoreisland.org>*

## Traces of Old Timey Riverside Recreation

At the July Sycamore Island meeting, Alex McCoy, Al Brown, and Betty Burchell gave a spicy little presentation of nearby riverside recreational activity on either side of 1900. Culled from old maps, deeds, photos, articles, and stumblings-upon while foraging for evidence, a faded and spotty pastime picture emerged for five general areas:

At Carderock, a 1936 aerial photo shows a road to the river including a perfectly circular pattern near the downstream end of the playing field. Al Brown used his Global Positioning System to locate a circular bed-rock feature at this spot. A 1912 deed for this land lists a pavilion. All this plus the fancy concrete debris cast away in the woods suggests a public, recreational facility.

At the next site, downstream from Carderock, there seems to have been an encampment where two stainless steel latrines were found, some brick fireplaces, and some tall PEPCO poles.

Further downstream at Lock 10, Mr. Swainson had cabins and boats for rent in the early 1900's, according to older local residents. There one can find a low, rock wall along the river that Mr. Swainson may have constructed to preserve the shoreline.

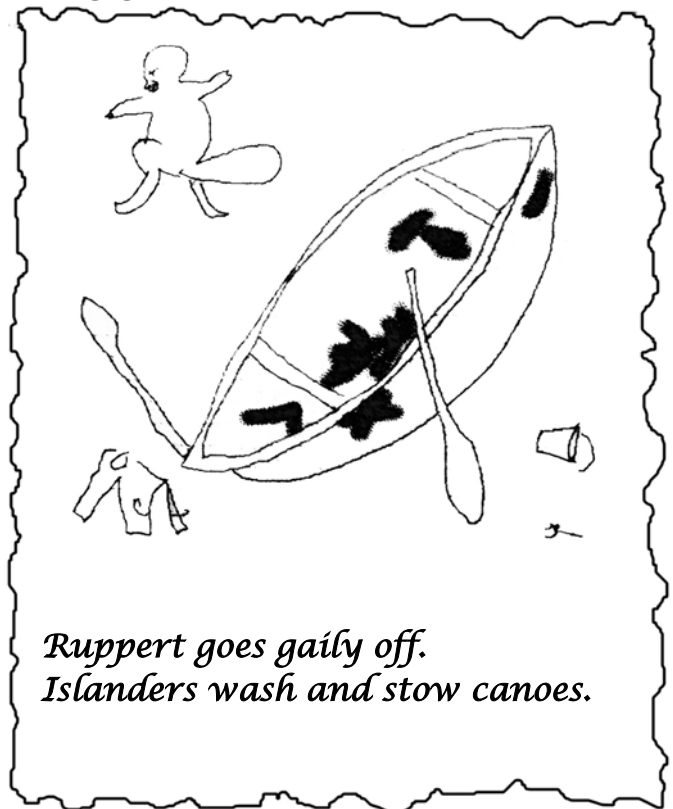
Downstream, on Cabin John and Chatauqua Islands, many remnants of houses can be found, and good riddance to them, according to written accounts in Glen Echo records of a still, speakeasies, and dead drunks.

And then we come to the Pa-taw-o-meck Café, built in 1890 on the bluffs across from Sycamore Island landing and below MacArthur Boulevard. The advertising tract for this café shows a sprawling, whimsical wooden structure that burned down only six months after construction.

Did I fail to mention the only private recreational facility left along this stretch of the river? Organized in 1886, it was known then as the Sycamore Island Pleasure Club.

—Rene Dunham and Betty Burchell

## Ruppert



*Ruppert goes gaily off.  
Islanders wash and stow canoes.*

Cartoon by Johnna Robinson

## Star Mitchell in Boating Accident

Thanks to Peggy Thomson for sending us Angus Phillips' *Washington Post* piece, "Danger Rapidly Approaching," in which he tells the story of Sycamore Island member Star Mitchell's kayaking accident on West Virginia's Cheat River. (Copies of the article will be on the table in the clubhouse for all to read--and contemplate.) Briefly, Star flipped over in Class IV rapids, going very fast, and hit her head. She was never unconscious, but after she was pulled from the water, she lay on the rocks and was afraid to move. Just as well, because a top vertebra was broken (usually resulting in paralysis--or death), which means that she now wears a body cast--and peripherals--for 3 months. In the message Star left on Peggy's answering machine after the delivery of a bouquet from the Island, she says: "*Roses, daylilies and everything else under the sun, they're bringing me cheer. They drink water like crazy, slurping it up and keeping smiles on their faces.*" She'd like to be writing to tell us, but writing and looking down is an ordeal in a neck brace, and so she lets her voice bring the message: "*Thank you, Sycamore Club! You've brought me very much cheer.*"



## Sunday Relief Caretakers

Date	Time	Name(s)	Telephone
August 6	9:00 - 3:00 3:00 - Dusk	Lisa and Chris Kliefoth Pat and Milt Cerny	301 229-2158 703 527-4376
August 13	9:00 - 3:00 3:00 - Dusk	Pat Barnett-Brubaker Rochelle and Bill Banta	301 925-7371 301 718-4217
August 20	9:00 - 3:00 3:00 - Dusk	Pat Hartge and Alan Strasser Birgit and Brian Waidmann	301 907-6657 703 536-3168
August 27	9:00 - 3:00 3:00 - Dusk	Abigail and John Wiebenson Louise and Matt Meyer	202 332-6857 202 328-6834

**\*\*\* Caretaker Volunteers \*\*\***

Call John Krasny (301-564-0342) or Jeff Komarow (301-897-5996) to volunteer for caretaking in September and October. You can also contact them by e-mail at [jfkrasny@erols.com](mailto:jfkrasny@erols.com) or [jeffkomarow@aol.com](mailto:jeffkomarow@aol.com) Volunteers from the waiting list are encouraged. It's a great way to spend time on the Island!

## Large Parties August– September

Date	Time	Who	What
September 23	1 to 6 p.m.	Emily Glazer and Karl Kosok	Washington Ethical Society families

A large party application form may be printed from the club's Web page at  
<http://www.sycamoreisland.org/systems.htm>

— or —

To request a form through the mail, call the Supervisor of Parties,  
Bill Eichbaum , 301-229-1713



## *The Sycamore Islander*

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<http://www.sycamoreisland.org>

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August 2000

### **This Issue:**

- Regatta againna!
- Old timers = good timers.
- Lightning literally litters landscape.
- Garbage exhibits "country club creep."
- Our Star canoeist crashes, Class IV.



**Were they having fun yet?**

Mark your calendars for the **upcoming Annual Regatta**. This event gets better each year, so plan to get on down to the Island for the festivities. See p. 3 for details. — photos by David Winer