



The Sycamore Islander

February, 2003

Volume 82 No. 2

President's Remarks; February Meeting

As you may have heard, there was a bit of excitement on the ferry a few weeks ago, when the river level was over 9 feet. Although the river was not yet at flood stage, the Island certainly was much smaller (there was no ferry landing, and there was a lake alongside the canoe shed), and the river was so much bigger, faster and more wild than I had seen it before (be sure to read Joe's account, and see Dave's pictures). This was Joe's first experience with really high water, water that may have been higher than Doc ever experienced. In reviewing the rise and fall of the water on the Internet, I was struck by some interesting bits of information.

First, I should tell you that I usually watch the levels on the North Fork of the Shenandoah more closely than I do the Potomac, because there is a low-water bridge that I cross semi-regularly that is under water after heavy rains. After the heavy rains on New Year's Eve and Day, that gauge spiked upward dramatically and then dropped within hours after the rain stopped. The low-water bridge became a dam to trees and branches that had been washed down, making it impossible to cross, even after the water dropped.

The Potomac crested at Little Falls two days after the Shenandoah, on a day of steady drizzle, but well after the heavy rains had ceased. It takes a couple of days for the water to collect throughout the watershed before flowing through Little Falls. The crest was also about two days after the Potomac crested at PawPaw. A rule of thumb is that the crest at Little Falls is about half of the crest at PawPaw, which certainly held true this time. There are several points I want you to understand as a result of this.

First, if the Island is going to flood, there will be a few days notice. By watching the internet (you can get to this information from www.sycamoreisland.org) Joe will know if he needs to be tying down the canoes, and, even more importantly, if he needs to be getting Kelsey, Kaylen, and himself off the Island.

Second, the internet provides more than just the height of the water. It also shows the amount of water in cubic feet per second (cfs) that is flowing through Little Falls. This is actually a more accurate reading of how dangerous the river is to swimmers and boaters. At about 4 feet, a level that is above-average for most of the summer-months, only about 10,000 cfs of water is flowing

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. **Note to submitters of announcements, articles, or letters: The deadline for inclusion in the March issue is receipt at the Editors' address on Feb. 28. Earlier submissions receive priority.**

through Little Falls. At 9 feet, a little more than twice the height, more than 11 times as much water is flowing through, 110,000 cfs. The force of the current is so much stronger and more dangerous than the level alone would indicate.

This brings me to the last point. Officially, the ferry stops operating at a level of 5 feet. The caretaker does have some discretion about this. Since the water typically rises faster and less predictably than it drops, Joe can close the ferry slightly below 5 feet if it is rising. He can also open the ferry when it is slightly above 5 feet, if it is dropping. If you have any doubt about whether the ferry is operational, call.

The January meeting was held at the Irish Channel, hosted by Nell Hennessey and Frank Daspit. We all had a wonderful time, enjoying the beverages and snacks they provided. For those of you who missed it, there's been a promise that we can do it again next year.

The discussion was interesting, too. George Loeb is leading an effort to set goals for membership. This is turning out to be a much broader subject than he originally thought. What was originally viewed as how (or if) to reward contributions to the health and well-being of the Island from people on the waiting list has grown to be a much larger topic on the desirability of growth and the qualities that are desirable in members. It also included the possibility of establishing a new class of membership, for those who perform a service for the Club on a regular basis. There will be more about these topics in the next meeting, and, in the March *Islander*, your opinions will be solicited.

The February meeting will be held at Alan and Caroline Gelb's house. I hope to see many of you there. Directions: From the Glen Echo

shopping center take Goldsboro Road to River Road. Continue on Goldsboro through the traffic signal one more block and turn left onto Millwood Road to 6824.

—Ann Marie Cunningham, President

Minutes of the January '03 Meeting

Attendance: Alan Gelb, Brad Coolidge, Ann Marie Cunningham, Frank Daspit, Jim Drew, Bill Eichbaum, Nell Hennessey, John Lentz, Judy Lentz, Carl Linden, George Loeb, Larry Heilman, Bill Marmon, Star Mitchell, John Noble, Donal O'Hare, Sherry Smith, Peggy Thomson, Abigail Wiebenson, John Wiebenson, Tryon Wells, David Winer, Jane Winer.

The meeting was called to order at 8:00 p.m. at the Irish Channel Restaurant, H and 5th Sts. NW, Washington, DC. Nell Hennessey and Frank Daspit, who are part-owners of the restaurant, hosted and provided refreshments for the meeting. The Club's new president, Ann Marie Cunningham, conducted the meeting and moderated the discussion.

The minutes of the last month's meeting as printed in the *Islander* were approved.

Treasurer's Report: Alan Gelb reported that Club expenditures for last year came to \$61,000 or \$2000 under budget. Alan urged members to pay their dues promptly. The treasury needs cash on hand.

Membership: Jeff Komarow reported that there was little to report. The Waiting List is not open this coming year and we are not accepting any applications for the Waiting List.

Captain's Report: Tryon Wells reported that Joe Hage has repaired some damage to the ferry's railings caused by a minor mishap.

Editor's Report: Dave and Jane Winer reported that they have decided to conclude their term of service as editors sometime this year and advised the Club to begin a search for a new Editor of the *Islander*.

Camping/Parties Supervisor: John Noble reported that a total of 760 guests attended some eighteen events on the Island over the past year. Two memorial services were also held on the Island with some 400 attendees present at the services. Also, 250 students and faculty of the Lowell School held a gathering on the Island and, though it rained and drizzled most of the day, it was evident that the group had a very good time on the Island.

Canoeing Supervisor: Jim Drew, noted that the second canoe for sale was sold for \$55, not \$50 as previously indicated.

New Business: No new business was discussed at the meeting.

Old Business: The meeting returned to George Loeb's proposal at the November meeting to survey Club members on what they think the overall goals of the Club should be in the coming period especially with regard membership policy.

An extended discussion was conducted around the following questions. Should the Club find ways of opening up regular memberships to more of our applicants? Are there ways to reduce the many-year waits applicants face before a membership opening occurs? How do we balance need to protect the Island from over-usage by limiting membership size and making room for new members? Should families with children receive special consideration? In general should access to the Island be broadened?

George Loeb advanced for consideration two approaches to ease the waiting list log jam: a change in rules to make room for more senior memberships (opening up more regular memberships) and finding ways to reward waiting list people who serve the Club in major ways without violating standards of fairness. Membership or use privileges could be extended to anyone as reward for major services to the Club (for example, newsletter editor). The point of the survey would be to provide a broad-based view of the membership's preferences which is not necessarily expressed by the relatively small contingent of the membership attending monthly meetings. George Loeb and Ann Marie Cunningham will prepare a draft of the survey which will be presented for comment at the next meeting. The final version of the survey will then be sent to the membership.

The meeting warmly thanked the hosts for providing a most pleasant facility for the Club's deliberations and excellent refreshments for all in the best tradition of Irish hospitality. The meeting was adjourned at 10:00 p.m.

Floods and ice and two little girls.

Our esteemed Editor almost convinced me that our Caretaker's eleven- and nine-year old girls could be temporarily placed with Joe's relatives or even with nearby club members. But ice is now forming and memory tells me it could be an impediment to safe crossing for long periods—even weeks. Therefore, I suggest consideration of a breeches buoy. Anyone knowledgeable in this area—please speak out.

—Your former Captain, John Mathews

A little excitement down at the Island.

—by Joe Hage

This may come as a surprise to many of you, unfortunately not a big surprise to me, but I made a mistake. I didn't realize it right away and it took me all day to see just how big a mistake it was. My blunder was deciding to take the ferry to the mainland when the river level was over nine feet at the Little Falls gauge. At the time of my decision I was unsure if I wanted to test my canoeing skills in a river that was just about flood stage. And maybe I wanted to test the limits of my new method of holding the pull-rope with a carabiner tied to the railing of the ferry. However good these reasons may have seemed then, I later learned how bad an idea it was.



The scene: steps down to the ferry are under water and debris drifts by.

Morning

I knew the river was going to rise and I made ready for imminent flood. I made a big trip to the Safeway, rented some movies for the kids, and picked up a six-pack for daddy. Back at the island I secured all the island canoes and flipped them upright so they could rise with the water. I did the same thing for the members' johnboats and other boats not stored in the canoe shed. I



Starting across.

tied down the picnic tables, and I raised the pull rope as high as it would go. This would be my first flood and I was a little nervous.

On Friday morning when we got up, the river was really high. The Island had been reduced

to a fraction of its former self. The bench by the ferry landing on the Island was completely submerged. At least half the boardwalk was under water. And the current out in the channel was moving pretty fast with tree limbs and other debris sailing by. Soon the phone started ringing. I told Tryon that everything was under control and how I was keeping the kids home. I also told him of my plan



A tree comes by once in a while.



Just a little farther...

to take the ferry across the river. I wanted to stay put but I had to pick up something at the Italian Embassy and that day was the only day it could be done. He told me he would come down and watch me cross. I get ready to go and before I know it, David Winer and Tryon are on the opposite bank with their cameras at the ready.

I attach my canoe to the ferry, just in case, and with my heart pounding I head out into the current. The force of the river is incredible, even with my system of carabiners it's a real struggle to reach the mainland where I had to walk on top of the railing to reach dry land. Some good pictures, some back-slapping, and I was off on my errand.



Ahhh... nothin' to it.

Afternoon

I love this kind of a challenge. I love testing myself against the forces of nature. (Within reason, of course.) So on the way back from the embassy I played over in my head all the steps necessary to get myself home safely. By the time I reached the ferry and saw the river in its menacing color of brown, I was pretty excited. As I was getting ready to go, Ann Marie, our new Club President, walks up in time to see me off. She's obviously a little nervous about me going across and I do my best to sound confident and reassuring. I play it all through my head one more time and with my heart in my throat I pull myself into the big, fast-moving water. At first it's not bad, like on the way over, hard, but doable. I quickly reach the support rope at the half-way mark and I clip the second carabiner to the pull-rope. I'm thinking I'm home free now and I turn and give Ann Marie the thumbs-up and a big smile. But then, just like some adventure movie when you think you got it made, CRASH!!!!, half the railing that's attached to the pull-rope is ripped from the ferry by the force of the river. Luckily I'm not pulled into the water (temp 40, air temp 30's--bad day for swimming) but now I can't reach the pull-rope. I decide not to panic.

I attach a rope to the other railing (the unbroken one) and attempt to pull myself through the current to reach the pull-rope. Guess what, CRASH!!!!, that railing snaps as well. So now I'm stuck in the middle of the river and two chains are all that's keeping the ferry from washing down stream over the dam. The chains are of equal length, which leaves me broadside to the current and powerless against its enormous pressure. The ferry rocks and



What, we worry?



Attempting to slip the corner cable-attachment, but can't get slack due to current's enormous force. Solution: take the canoe to the Island for a hacksaw.

giant tree limbs whiz by, sometimes bumping the ferry. By this time another member has joined Ann Marie on the shore and my kids have come out to the other shore wearing over-sized waders and laughing at their father. I reluctantly ask them to call Tryon and before long there are half-a-dozen Island members at the shore wielding throw-ropes, life jackets, and cameras. We decide that I need to get Tryon on the ferry to help me. Boy, was it ever smart of me to bring my canoe.

I have to get into my canoe and face the raging Potomac to pick up Tryon. The noise of the water churning beneath the ferry is so loud that I can barely hear the shouting from the shore. I manage to get into the boat and, Wow, I find the canoeing much easier than I thought it would be.

The two of us navigate into the partial eddy created by the ferry and we both crawl back onto the ferry as it rocks in the river. Alas, even with Tryon's help we are unable to move the ferry against the strong current. The final solution is to hacksaw the chain from the end of the ferry on the mainland side so we can slice into the current and get to the Island. This we are able to do without further mishaps and I paddle Tryon back to the mainland where all concerned breathe a sigh of relief. Two hours after that first railing broke, I make it safely back to the Island and wave good-bye to my new friends.

—photos by Tryon Wells and David Winer



The path down from McArthur Boulevard.

We've chronicled here before the sorry state of the walk leading down to the towpath. At left is former-Captain John Matthews standing on one of the rocky ledges that made the walkway so treacherous. Starting last summer, John tied to get various organizations to fix the path. Eventually a water-main break at the parkway below caused the WSSC to grade and apply large gravel for access by their machinery. Later, John, who was ex-Captain by then, persisted in getting loads of smaller gravel applied to make walking easier. Below is our new Captain, Tryon Wells, strolling along what seems like a freeway in comparison to the old billy goat walkway. Thanks, John!



Ruppert



Ruppert ferries across at 7 feet.

Islanders! Could you do it?

Cartoon by Johnna Robinson



It's been a long time, but finally... WINTER.

A couple of years ago we had a cold spell good enough to freeze the canal for skating, but this time it was so cold, for so long, that thick ice created a river playground. I stopped by the Club to take some pictures and discovered the whole area was swarming with people. There were lots of kids—including the adult kind. I ran into several Islanders, among them, Joe Hage, who was obviously delighted by the activities. Our ferry landing offered the best place to enter the river, so the crowds naturally were largest nearby.

Are you reading Joe's frequent reports on the Club's web site? If not, give it a try—this is an easy way to keep current about what's happening around Sycamore Island. *The captions for these photos are direct quotes of text extracted from the Caretaker's Log between January 24 and 28.* —Dave Winer



The Park Service gave us the green light to skate on the canal. Until Monday they were trying to keep people off the ice. Last Friday the police kicked me off the canal, but now they have posted the "skate at your own risk" signs and the skating is great.



The word for this past weekend was ice skating. Starting early on Saturday people have been skating on the perfectly smooth ice on the channel between the Island and the mainland.





Yes, we even had a hockey game going on...



...and the sound of hockey sticks hitting pucks could be heard all day.



Today will be the first day in almost six months that I won't need a boat to leave home.



Many people came down to enjoy and to photograph this unusual event.

In touch with Joe... (winter on the Island).

We've had quite a bit of excitement down here witnessing the recent moods of the river. The river is like an indicator of the climate and precipitation of the surrounding watershed and the Island is an indicator of the limits of human habitation in its flood plain. Lately, it seems, the limits are being tested.



The slough next to Sycamore Island becomes a popular playground.

The new year started, as you may recall with quite a bit of rain. The rain was very nice and I enjoyed listening to it as I lazily slept in on New Year's day. That was on Wednesday, by Friday the island was one quarter its normal size. The river level reached six inches below flood stage, by far the highest water I'd seen since I started here. No need to panic, we had plenty of food and the kids really didn't mind missing school for a day. The river slowly receded and we were left with an island covered in MUD.

Mud was everywhere! Thick layers of mud had to be shoveled from the boardwalk and the ferry landings. A walk to the Captain's Float meant a slippery trudge through ankle-high river mud. The kids found that the fire pit there by the captain's float had trapped some water creating a mini mud lake. So one day was spent playing in the mud like little pigs. Mud on our boots, mud on our clothes, mud in the house, mud everywhere. We had to do a lot more laundry that week but then it got cold and the mud froze into concrete.

It has been very interesting living close to the water in winter and watching it slowly change to its solid state. Early in the month we enjoyed the thrill of throwing large rocks onto the canal and watching them crash through the ice. Soon we were walking and yes, skating on the canal. The river took a little longer to freeze but by mid-January we had to chop our way through half an

inch of the ice to get to the mainland. The frigid temperatures continued and before long the ferry was engulfed in thick ice. Without the ferry the new method of transport became sitting in a canoe on top of the ice and pulling ourselves sliding across the river. The canoe on the ice worked well but it wasn't long before the ice became so thick that we merely walked across the river. This past week we have been walking on the river ice and enjoying the unusual sight of ice-skaters on the river. I feel so fortunate to be here on the Island during this rare deep-freeze.

The snows we've had this month has made it easy to track some of the animals on and near the island. I identified the tracks of fox, raccoon, deer mice, beaver, squirrel, Canada geese and great blue heron. This is the time of year to see migrating waterfowl and this month I've seen Common Mergansers, Hooded Mergansers, Lesser Scaups, and many Buffleheads. I regularly see four different types of woodpeckers and I've seen eagles, hawks, and owls.

There's at least another month of winter adventure still to go, let's hope the ice skating and the birding are as good as they have been this past month. See you on the river.

—Your Caretaker, Joe

Sunday Relief Caretakers February-March 2003

Date	Time	Name(s)	Telephone
February 2	11:00 a.m. - dark	Norman Metzger	202-546-1034
February 9	11:00 a.m. - dark	John and Susan Membrino	202-726-6372
February 16	11:00 a.m. - dark	Tom Hylden and Shelly Davis	301-951-4156
February 23	11:00 a.m. - dark	Terry Murphy	301 263-9766
March 2	10:00 a.m. - 2:00	Susan and Howard Weiss	301-320-3766
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Elissa Free & Bill Nooter	202-537-1434
March 9	10:00 a.m. - 2:00	Tom Hylden and Shelly Davis	301-951-4156
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Susan and Tove Elfstrom	703-533-5537
March 16	10:00 a.m. - 2:00	Meg and Charlie Jones	301-229-1917
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Alison Levine and Bob Palermo	301-320-4353
March 23	10:00 a.m. - 2:00	Sarah Duggin and Kirk Renaud	301-718-9632
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Susan and John O'Sullivan	202-362-6211
March 30	10:00 a.m. - 2:00	Tom Lott	202-362-8282
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Jack Sanders	703-799-6624

***** Caretaker Volunteers *****

To volunteer for Sunday relief caretaking, call Candy Means: 301-320-5270.

Volunteers from the waiting list are encouraged. It's a great way to spend time on the Island!

Large Parties February 2002

Date	Time	Who	What

No Large Parties are scheduled for the month of February.

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, John Noble
e-mail: jnoble@erols.com, phone: 301-320-3554, fax: 301-320-4216



The Sycamore Islander

6613 80th Place
Cabin John, MD 20818

<http://www.sycamoreisland.org>

To view this month's Sycamore Islander on the Internet, go to:
<http://www.sycamoreisland.org/windshield/islander>.

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February 2003

- High water excitement.
- Frozen water excitement.
- Membership issues under review.
- Upper path down to the Island: Ahhhh.
- Winter wonderland around Sycamore Island.



We now cross the river in a canoe. I strung a rope across the river and with very little trouble we are able to pull ourselves skimming over the ice. From the Caretaker's Log on the Club's website, January 22.

—photo by David Winer