



The Sycamore Islander

October 2003

Volume 82 No. 10

President's Message

The Club had the good fortune to have John Wiebenson as a member for over a quarter of a century, making his sudden loss even more painful. On behalf of the Club, I want to express our sympathies to his wife Abigail, three sons John, Derek, Samuel, and the rest of the family for their tragic loss. Appreciations of the remarkable life he led are on pages four to five.

Isabel. Joe Hage was very in tune to the catastrophe that was predicted. As the storm warnings were posted, he and some volunteer club members tied up the canoes and prepared the Club's property in other ways. When the government had closed down in fear of the impending storm, Joe, and a few other volunteers, did the final storm preparations, including moving his personal belongings up off the lower level of the apartment, which flooded twice in 1996. It seems that it is mostly tree damage, along with the power outage, so we're lucky compared to some earlier floods. But we will need your help with cleanup. Please watch for the workfest, and please try to fit it into your schedule.

The graph on page seven of this issue portrays the drama. Prior to the Isabel, the river had been at about 3.7 feet height at the Little Falls dam. This was above average for this time of year. Two days after Isabel, as the rain that had fallen upriver flowed into our area, the river rose above flood stage to 11.3 feet, and then began dropping. Two more days later, the heavy rains again brought the river to flood stage. The red line (for those of you who get the online and full color version) shows flood stage. The blue line shows the level of the water, as it rose rapidly from a very steady point on Sept 18 to the crest on the 21st, and then a rather rapid fall. There was an even steeper rise on the 23rd, and a much slower fall.

As dramatic as this is, the change in the stream flow is even more indicative of the power and danger of the river. The triangles on the following picture show the average stream flow, less than 2000 cubic feet per second. It was about 7000 cfs prior to Isabel. At flood stage, it is about 130,000 cfs. It reached 170,000 cfs at its crest on Sunday. The height of the water tripled, but the amount of water was 20 times as much! That translates into water that is much faster, much more forceful, and much more dangerous than the height alone would suggest.

— Ann Marie Cunningham

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 Editor, Norman Metzger, 638 G Street, SE, Washington, DC 20003-2724 or by fax to 202/544-6027. Text and graphics may be sent as email attachments to nm2@bellatlantic.net. **Note to submitters of announcements, articles, or letters: The deadline for inclusion in the November issue is receipt at the Editor's address by October 26th. Earlier submissions receive priority.**

Minutes of the September 10, 2003 Membership Meeting

Present: Gerry Barton, Johnna Robinson, Jim Drew, John Wiebenson, Abigail Wiebenson, John F. Stapko, Ann Marie Cunningham, Tryon Wells, Ned Goddard, Renee Dunham, Peter Winkler

Call to Order: President Ann Marie Cunningham called the meeting to order at 8:15 p.m.

Minutes: The minutes of the August meeting were approved.

Communications: Ann Marie reported on a communication from the Nature Conservancy, which has received a grant to study the biological diversity of the Potomac River Gorge, including, with permission, a look at Sycamore and Ruppert. Several members expressed the hope that the Conservancy might be able to advise us on appropriate native plantings for the Island. We will invite our wildflower experts. [The Conservancy's Stephanie Flack will speak on the project at the October meeting. See p. six.]

Ann Marie also reported on a communication from member Pat Berry, on the dedication of a memorial in Rockville, MD, to firefighters who died on 9/11. The dedication took place September 11.

Officers' Reports: There were no reports from the treasurer, the financial secretary, the membership secretary, the canoe supervisor, or the caretaker.

Captain's Report: Much to the admiration of those present, Deputy Captain John Stapko displayed the first of two stainless steel bumpers for the ferry that he *forged*. [See p. nine to view John's work.] Captain Tryon Wells reported that summer vacation caretaker (and former member) David Sitomer had maintained a journal of his stay on the Island, and that it was posted on the website and well worth reading.

Editor's Report: Ann Marie passed on *Islander* editor Norm Metzger's request for submissions for the November and December issues.

Fishing Derby and Regatta: Peter Winkler reported that the fishing derby was a great success, in large part due to the splendid efforts of organizers, George and Shelley Malusky. Gerry Barton reported that Bill and Rochelle Banta did an equally admirable job hosting the regatta, which featured races, jousting, and pizza. [More on the regatta on page 7 of this issue.]

Old Business: Gerry Barton reported on his efforts to

research whether we in fact have a right of way for the bridge over the canal. He visited the Historical Society of Washington, DC, and spent time looking through the Club's archives there. Although he was not able to answer the question, he learned a lot of information about the bridge and its predecessors, which he shared. The right of way is alleged to date back to 1889. Tryon Wells provided some additional information about early times, based in part on the centennial edition of the *Islander*, which, he noted, is available on our website. Among other things, the Club paid \$100 total for Sycamore and Rupperts. Other members observed that we could perform a title search in Montgomery County to find the answer to the right of way question.

Gerry proposed that we periodically provide for an updating of our records at the Historical Society. There was discussion about our records and valuable papers generally, and about the Club's prior difficulties in maintaining a safe deposit box. Tryon volunteered to draft a provision for the by-laws about a safe deposit box, specifying, in particular, which officers would maintain keys. Tryon stated that he had possession of certain club records and documents that he had been given by John Thomson; Johnna Robinson stated that she had a copy of the PhD dissertation concerning an archeological dig on Rupperts (apparently, there are relics from Rupperts Island in a collection at American University); and Caretaker Joe Hage has custody of the club seal.

New Business: Ann Marie Cunningham stated that we need to form a nominating committee. Ann Marie will ask Carl Linden to help and asked for other volunteers. Tryon Wells volunteered to help.

There was a brief discussion of the release of sewage, in August, into the Potomac via Antietam Creek. The problem was caused by a power failure at a sewage treatment facility.

Tryon Wells then presented two proposals: that we charge a fee to those members who receive a mailed, printed copy of the *Islander*, and that we investigate providing a mechanism whereby members and waitlisters could pay their dues electronically. [See next page for the texts]. In discussion, we agreed that it would be appropriate for Tryon to draft a proposal and publish it in the *Islander*, thereby giving everyone notice before we take action.

Regarding the electronic collection of dues, Tryon stated that it is probably too late to implement anything for the coming year, but that we should investigate it for the future. There was a brief discussion of how much this proposal might cost—to set up and to maintain on an annual basis—and what we would gain in return. Tryon

observed that it would relieve the financial secretary of a lot of data entry, and that it would provide for immediate transfer of all dues paid to our bank account. Tryon agreed to look into possible options, including the use of Paypal.

Next Meeting: 8 p.m. Wednesday, October 8, Sycamore.

The meeting was adjourned at 10 p.m.

-- Peter Winkler, Recording Secretary

Two Proposed Amendments for October Meeting

Electronic Dues Payment

Motion: Develop payment procedure on the club's website to accept annual dues and waiting list fees by credit card.

All payers will still have the option to pay by check if desired.

Pros

The chief benefit to the club is really a benefit to one of its most overworked officers: the Financial Secretary. If this motion is adopted, and substantial numbers of members and applicants on the waiting list use the service, the Financial Secretary will see a dramatic reduction in the number of checks that need to be deposited in the club's bank account, as most payments will be received by the account automatically electronically. The Financial Secretary will no longer need to receive 430 payments in the mail, tear open each one, enter the check and annual volunteer information into the club's database, and then deposit each check at the bank. An additional benefit is that most dues and fee payments will likely be paid earlier each year.

The annual dues notice can be sent by e-mail, reducing the mailing charges (\$200 annually) and volunteer effort needed each December to fold, stuff and mail these letters to the membership and applicants on the waiting list. A reminder e-mail to those who haven't paid by late March can also be easily sent.

Online credit card payments are common practice today and most members and applicants on the waiting list should find no difficulty in making their payments on the club's website.

No one is forced to do anything. Check payers can still pay by check if they want.

Cons

The one-time software development cost to implement a web-based system of collecting club dues should be around \$2,000. The cost to maintain the system and pay the credit card companies should be around \$500 annually, depending on individual credit card company's fees and rates.

Charge for *Islander* Distribution

Motion: Charge each member and applicant on the waiting list \$20 annually IF they want a print-copy *Islander* sent to them in the mail each month. All recipients can receive the electronic version of the *Islander* for free.

Pros

The club currently spends between \$7,000 and \$8,000 on printing and distributing the monthly newsletter to about 400 recipients. The club spends \$0 on distributing the electronic version to an additional 50 recipients (not counting the modest and occasional software purchase that makes this possible -- Acrobat last year and Publisher this year). Charging for the printed and mailed version will potentially save the club \$7,000 to \$8,000 annually. We will **save \$20** on every one who shifts to the electronic version and **receive \$20 extra** for everyone who wants to maintain the status quo. It won't matter how many recipients shift to the electronic version to realize the cost savings.

The money saved each year should forestall any general membership dues increases for several years.

No one is forced to do anything. Members may still receive the print-copy if they desire for what really amounts to a relatively inexpensive fee (\$20 per year).

Cons

Currently, the cost price per print copy (counting the postal charge) is just under \$20 per recipient per year. If our number of recipients dropped dramatically, the charge per copy would probably rise somewhat.

Some members have stated that they feel the *Islander* will be less read in electronic form. Some others claim the reverse is true. Still others point out it is less likely to be printed if printing is left up to the individual member. Some don't feel it is necessary to print it out at all. Certainly, what individual members and waiting list applicants will do if they elect to receive the electronic version will be widely varied.

The motion will be taken up again at the October monthly meeting — 8pm, October 8, at the Island.

John Wiebenson

John Wiebenson, a distinguished architect and Sycamore member since 1975, died suddenly on Sunday September 28th. Below follow appreciations of his life by his family and by Sam Smith.

John Wiebenson, architect, community advocate and city historian, died on Sunday, September 28 in an accident. Known to all in his many communities as “Wieb”, Wiebenson was a design and community advocate for Washington projects ranging from Bread for the City, Martha’s Table, Emmaus House, Takoma Elementary School and many homes and businesses. He had a special fondness for helping community-based organizations create cheerful spaces at a reasonable cost. In his Dupont Circle neighborhood where he lived for 35 years, he secretly planted many trees and flowers and was always helpful to his neighbors.

For many years Wieb drew a political and architectural cartoon called “Archihorse” for the DC Gazette, which later became “The Progressive Review”. He drew community maps and illustrated books including “Washington D.C. Beyond the Monuments” and “The Illustrated the Cleveland Park Guide to Historic Homes”. In 1968 he was one of the designers of Martin Luther King’s Resurrection City on the Mall. Wieb also wrote articles and editorials, many of which championed the worthiness of Washington as a city for people rather than politicians.

Wiebenson, who was born in Denver, Colorado and grew up in Colorado, was a graduate of Harvard College and the Harvard Graduate School of Design. After graduation, he moved to San Francisco where he worked for the renowned architect Charles Moore and helped form the firm Agora Architects. In 1967 he relocated to Washington to be a founding faculty member of the University of Maryland School of Architecture. He later formed his own Washington based firm, Wiebenson and Dorman. From 1994-96 he was a visiting professor at the Chinese University in Hong Kong.

He is survived by his wife, Abigail, and three sons John, Derek and Samuel, a daughter-in-law, Tara, a grandson, Tristan, three siblings Carla Branscombe, Mary Gilland and Timothy Wirth and many nieces and nephews.

Below is a remembrance by Sam Smith taken from: <http://prorev.com/freedc.htm>

Architect John Wiebenson died the way he lived - helping somebody and fixing something.

He had gone to Martha's Table to check out a fumed filled space below an old auto garage planned as part of the organization's expansion. The fire department said later that only 16% of the air down there was oxygen, not enough to keep someone alive. In fact, for several hours the only people who went in wore gas masks and hazmat clothing.

But Wiebenson was not easy to dissuade once he decided something needed to be done. And he had imported to this capital of risk aversion some of the casual affection for adventure of the Colorado in which he had been raised. Wieb, as everyone called him, simply did what he thought had to be done.

Which is one reason there was housing for Resurrection City in the 1960s and the Old Post Office is still on Pennsylvania Avenue and some of the niftiest maps of DC were published and Bread for the City got a new headquarters.

Wieb was also one that tiny party of architects who really understand that buildings are meant to serve people and not the other way around. He also understood that one of the ways this happened was with spaces that made you happy. Joanne Leonard wrote in the Washington Post, "With cutout paper letters stuck to the window of his Connecticut Avenue office, John Wiebenson identifies himself and his partner, Kendall Dorman, as 'basic' architects."

I knew that office well because for 23 years I was a subtenant in a back room at ridiculously low rent. It was a complicated arrangement because while I was Wieb's tenant, he was my cartoonist, and I had the only fax machine on the floor. And the only bathroom. Wieb created for the DC Gazette (now the Progressive Review) the first urban planning comic strip in the country, Archihorse, a subtle blend of his professional and geographic background.

One of the things I noticed along the way was how comfortable Wieb was with something that either bores or baffles some architects - the details of making your dreams actually function. There was just no conflict in Wieb's mind between imagination and results. It had to be different and it had to work.

His house was right around the corner on S Street where he lived with Abigail - his wife, anchor to windward, enthusiast, calmer down, brightener up, and head of Lowell School - plus three sons striving to outdo their father in independence, competence, and humor. They lived in an anarchistic mélange of styles, but mostly in a place that, while lacking the look, still somehow had the feel of a western cabin that you had just entered after a long ride in the snow.

It was there that Wieb had presided over Wild Man Nights, Friday meals at which he and his young sons would prepare and eat a meal without any utensils or normal table manners, picking up steaks in their hands and smashing baked potatoes with their fists while reading and discussing the latest comic books. Like most of what Wieb did or built, Wild Man Nights had several primary characteristics: they were different, they were fun, and they worked.

What you have read here over the years has been deeply affected by my proximity to this remarkable man who loved freedom and common sense and helped me to cling on to them. I hope I can still do it without his encouragement and laughter. - SAM SMITH

CURRENTS AND WAVES

The Canoe Consultant Ready to Help Next Month

Beginning with the November issue, a bi-monthly column written by "The Canoe Consultant" will offer advice on enjoyable canoeing, from how to get into (and out of) the canoe to tips on buying to fine canoe "trails" in the DC area and elsewhere.

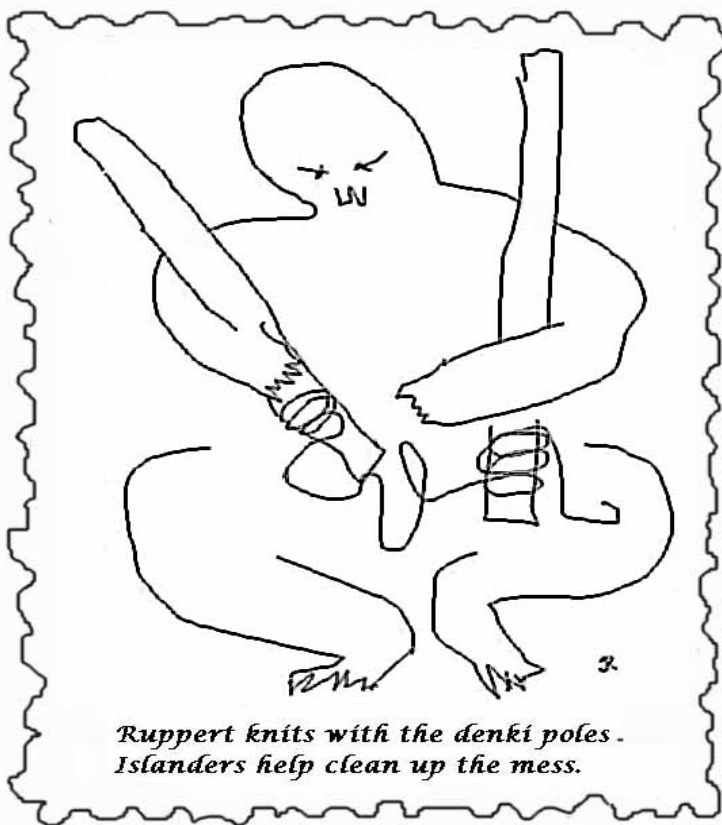
Growing Native: Nuts for Clean Water

Jen Schill of the Potomac Conservancy writes that "this autumn, you can help to restore native forests throughout the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay region, one acorn at a time. Join thousands of Growing Native volunteers who will collect native tree seeds, which will be grown into seedlings for stream- and river-side restoration projects. Join in a public collection site on Saturday, October 18, or collect anytime this fall, right in your own backyard! Native forests ensure cleaner water, healthier air, wildlife habitat, and recreational opportu-

nities far into the future. Growing Native is coordinated by the Potomac Conservancy, on behalf of the Potomac Watershed Partnership." For more: www.growingnative.org.

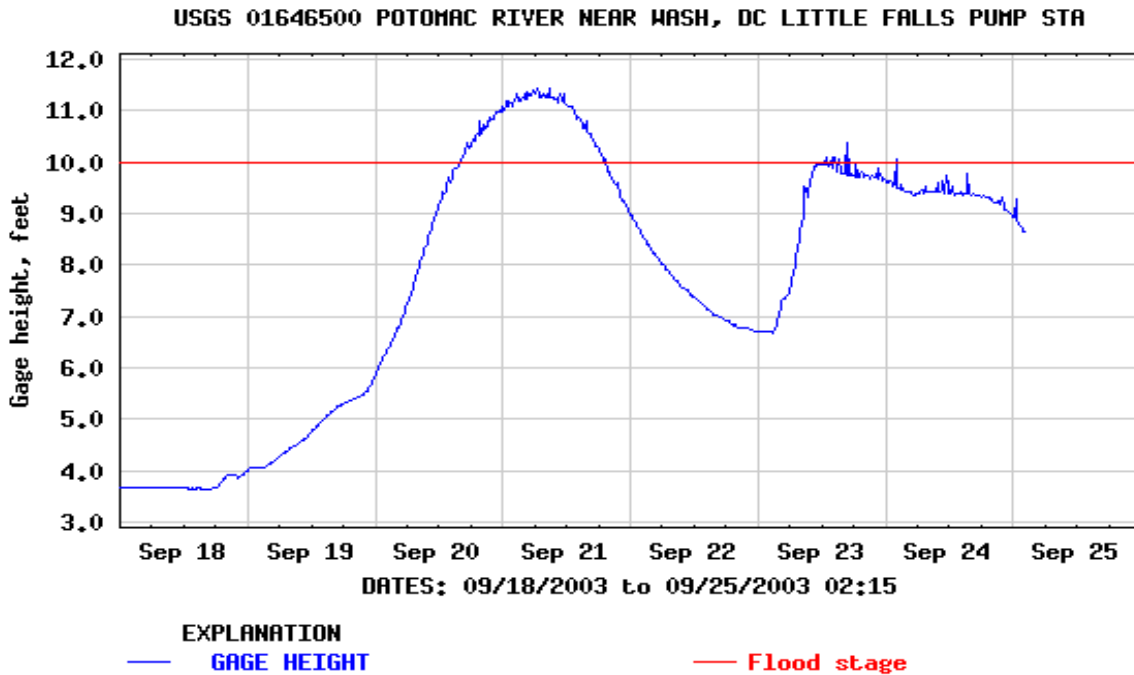
The Biodiversity of the Potomac Gorge Wednesday, October 8th, 8pm, at the Island

Stephanie Flack, The Nature Conservancy's new Potomac Gorge Project Director, will give a slide presentation on the Potomac Gorge, the fifteen-mile stretch of the Potomac from just above Great Falls to Georgetown. Ms Flack notes that "the Gorge is well-known for its exceptional recreational and scenic features, but few people are aware of its great biodiversity importance. Despite being located in a densely populated urban landscape, this 10,000-acre site is one of the most biologically rich natural areas in the eastern United States and the entire National Park system. It supports more than 400 occurrences of 200 rare species and natural communities."



Ruppert

*—Created by
Johnna Robinson*



Isabel and After

What went on before is told in excerpts from the Caretaker's Log below and in pictures that follow — all taken from the Island's web site.

Tuesday -- September 17, 2003

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.5

Judging by all the info I've gotten so far I've decided that we should prepare for a major flood to reach the island starting Friday night and it probably won't crest until Sunday. This means that all the canoes need to be taken out of the canoe shed, and all the furniture and appliances on the lower level of my quarters need to be moved upstairs. I've already brought in the swim float and I've started packing up all the clothes and kitchen stuff. — Joe

Friday -- September 19, 2003

Water Level at Little Falls: 4.5

Isabel has come and gone, faster than we expected. It turns out that today would be a good day to visit the Island to help with any chores and preparations for the coming flood. Since the storm didn't rain heavily in the Potomac river basin, Sycamore Island may escape damaging flood waters. Still, my forecast for the next two days will be to see river levels between 8 and 12 feet. — Tryon

Monday -- September 22, 2003

Water Level at Little Falls: 7.4

The river crested about 6 a.m. yesterday (Sunday) at 11.4 feet at the gauge at Little Falls. Today at 3:00 p.m. the river height has fallen to 7.4 feet and will probably be about 6 feet by tomorrow.

Joe has returned to the Island and reports that he has had power restored and things seem to be fine. All the canoes that were removed from their racks in the canoe shed are present and accounted for. The large tree limbs that fell on the Captain's float are apparently still on it and look to be a workfest project if they are not cleared before then. — Tryon

Tuesday -- September 23, 2003

Water Level at Little Falls: 10.1

A cold front moved through the region last night bringing 4.5 inches of rain locally and considerable water to the Potomac River Basin. The river level, already swollen with Hurricane Isabel's wet payload, surged back up to 10.1 feet at Little Falls at the crest of the mini-flood around noon today. The forecast for the next few days are for clear weather, which may allow the Potomac to settle back to more normal water levels.

The heavy rains also brought down more trees. Of interest to club members, a large dead tree below the path, just upstream of the canal bridge, came down on the power line to Sycamore Island and into the canal. The brand new telephone pole (erected less than a month ago) snapped and lies across the towpath and the canal. The new telephone pole on the Island is also damaged and bent over. — Tryon



The canoes survived thanks to some very hard work by a few folks, but the Captain's dock took a direct hit.



A quiet island, sun, water, and picnic tables — all in all a perfect day (almost)

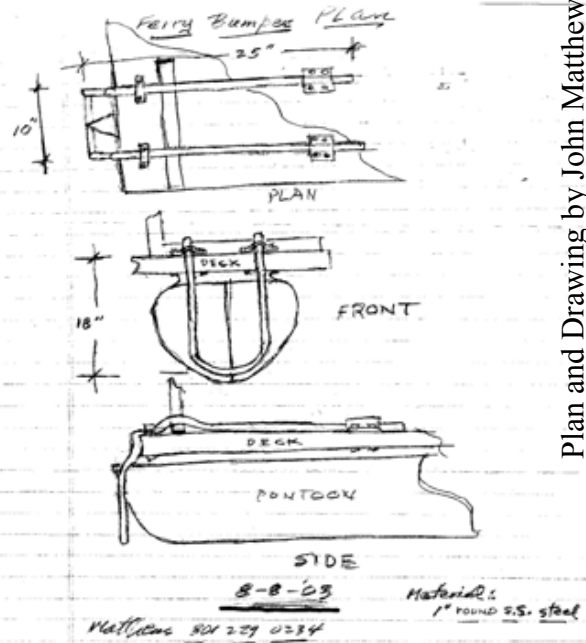


“When it rains, it pours.” Two power utility poles went down on Tuesday, September 23, one on the Island and the other ashore.

— Photos by David Winer and Tryon Wells

The Ferry (con't)

Last month's *Islander* reported that "John Matthews has devised a 1" stainless steel bar protection scheme to protect tip-end of the pontoons. The cost is under \$500 which is considerably cheaper than getting a replacement ferry and with implementation of John's proposal should take the daily pounding without allowing any further damage to the pontoons." John's plans have now been turned into reality by John Stapko who forged the protecting rods per John Matthew's proposal. Pictures of the "Stapko Smithy" in operation below. Going clockwise from top left: Sawing steel to length, Heating partly-bent rod Set-up, Red-Hot Steel, Adding first angle. For more photos go to <http://users.starpower.net/rstapko/forging%20web.html>.



Plan and Drawing by John Matthews



Photos by John Stapko (and, no, his camera didn't melt).

The 2003 Regatta

Someone with a crystal ball might have muttered "Après moi le deluge" looking at the festive air surrounding this year's Sycamore Island Regatta. Rain threatened on the Weather Channel but not on the Island, and Islanders treasure hunted, raced, jostled, and ate really well under a pleasant sun with just the right amount of clouds. The event was splendidly organized and run with gusto by Rochelle and Bill Banta stepping in this year for George and Marcia Loeb.



Bill and Rochelle Banta looking remarkably relaxed for orchestrating a very busy time.



Photos by Bill Banta and Norman Metzger



No. I'll be the lookout and **you paddle.**

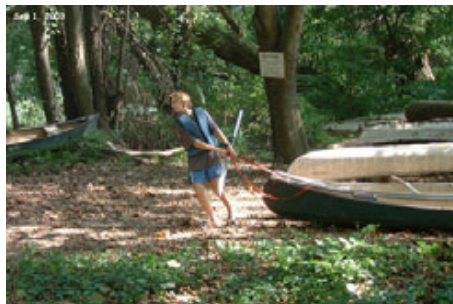
OK. One good shot across their bow will win it for us.



Charge!



What dam?



Where is everybody?

Saturday Relief Caretakers October — November 2003

October 4, 2003	10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	Richard Dianich	301-229-4138
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Faith Earll	301-983-2272
October 11, 2003	10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	Bill and Jane Hill	301-365-1874
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Nathan Means	202-234-5355
October 18, 2003	10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	Joan Barron and Paul Lang	301-657-2812
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Hester Ohbi and Bob Beauchamp	202-667-8529
October 25, 2003	10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Lynda Martin-McCormick	202-363-2863
November 1, 2003	10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	Witt Farquhar	301-320-4042
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Whitney Pinger	202-686-5443
November 8, 2003	10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Morris Coburn	301-563-6435
November 15, 2003	10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Bruce Gaber	301-654-7479
November 22, 2003	10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Susan Symington	301-229-1058
November 29, 2003	10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	2:00 p.m. - dark	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	

*** Caretaker Volunteers ***

To volunteer for Saturday 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 in October

Date	Time	Who	What/How Many
Oct 10	1 to 3	Rasmussens	St. Albans 5th Graders/15
Oct 11	11 to dusk	Star Mitchell	Friends for singing and dancing/35

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



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October 2003

- John Wiebenson
- Isabel
- Forging for the Ferry
- The 2003 Regatta
- Currents and Waves



Networking

Photo by David Winer