



Photo by David Winer

Fall Workfest

Sunday, November 14, 9 am to 2 p.m.

Rain Date: Sunday, November 21, 9 am to 2 p.m.

The Sycamore Islander

November 2004

Volume 83 No. 11

President's Message

The three hurricanes this season have brought high waters to the Island again. Joe has been watching the gauges and predictions far more often than he would like. When the prediction is for a flood, he has a lot of work that he must do in order to protect our canoes, the grills, the floats, the ferry and many other things that make the Island a pleasure for us. In addition, he has to be concerned about protecting his family's possessions. It is more than one person can do in the time between the prediction and the reality.

The Island closes when the gauge at Little Falls measures 5 feet; and Joe has the discretion to close the Island when the level is a little lower than that, if the water is rising rapidly. These episodes are inconvenient for us and much more so for Joe and his family. He is a skilled canoeist and can transport himself and the girls safely. However, with the three hurricanes this year and Isabel last year, the water levels have threatened to reach 16 feet or higher. At this level, the entire Island is under water including the lower level of the clubhouse. Fortunately, it hasn't reached that level since 1996. In that year, there were two floods, one caused by heavy rain coinciding with snowmelt from a big storm, and the other caused by Hurricane Fran.

Unfortunately, the USGS forecasts are not as predictive as we would like. Therefore, Joe has to prepare for a flood even when the predictions are for less than 16 feet. In the past, there has been a core group of volunteers who have helped him tie canoes to the trees, and move equipment and belongings to the second floor of the clubhouse or to the tool shed. With time, this group of volunteers has been shrinking. We need more volun-

November Meeting

Wednesday, November 10 @ 8 p.m.
At the Island!

Special Guest

Martin Klauber
People's Counsel, Montgomery County

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 e-mail attachments to normanmetzger@verizon.net. Telephone: 202/544-6027 or 202/445-5436 (cell). **Note to submitters of announcements, articles, or letters: The deadline for the December issue is receipt at the Editor's address by Monday, November 22. Earlier submissions receive priority.**

teers. We know that most of you love the Island, and care about it and about Joe. We know that, if asked, you would be willing to help. Many of you may not even be aware of the threat of flooding, because it often occurs a couple of days after the rain has ended. It takes time for the rain that fell throughout the watershed to flow down to our area. I have asked for volunteers in the past, so that we can maintain a list of people who are willing to help in an emergency, but received only a few responses. It was proposed at the last meeting that we adopt an “opt out” strategy. We will call you when we need help. You will be given an opportunity to opt out, with no questions asked. But you will have to take the initiative. Details on how to opt out will follow.

Our next meeting will be on the Island. Martin Klauber, Montgomery County's first People's Counsel, will be our guest. Marty, appointed in 1999, is a Montgomery County employee with the job of helping people who need variances to improve their homes. He has given us helpful advice in the past and has promised to do so in the future as we pursue the building permit. The Island and the unique requirements we have compared to other buildings in the county intrigue him. Please come and meet him and learn a little about the process that faces us. The meeting is the last one to be held on the Island this year, on November 10, at 8:00 p.m..

— Ann Marie Cunningham

Marit Thorson

Mrs. Marit Thorson, a Sycamore member with her husband, Phillip, since 1947, died October 16th at age 90. In addition to the cares of a three-children family she was, according to the *Washington Post*, “a longtime advocate for children, the elderly, the poor and the disabled.” From 1973 to 1981 she was director of volunteer services in Montgomery County, encouraging volunteering in more than 200 public and private agencies. Before that she had served as state legislative representative for the Maryland Health and Welfare Council. Chair of the Montgomery County Health and Welfare Council, legislative chair of the county’s Youth Commission and was a Maryland delegate to the 1960 White House Commission on Children and Youth. Mrs. Thorson was born in Sweden, brought to the U.S. as an infant, and in her late teens lived with relatives in Stockholm and Bonn, Germany where she witnessed Nazi book burnings and was so outspoken that her relatives had to get her out of the country.

From Holly Syrrakos, Archivist: 75 Years Ago At Sycamore Island

Selections from the November 1929 *Sycamore Islander*

Always a subject of interest, the November 1929 *Islander* begins with, “Final Decision on Club-Room Building Plan to be Made at Next Monday’s Meeting.” And indeed the Club did decide to spend \$3,000 to re-finish the main room inside and out, extend the ladies’ room by 10 feet, and add a porch on the river side of the building. It helps to remember that whatever was actually done remains no more because the building was destroyed in the flood of 1936.

The next article appearing (no doubt in order of importance) is titled, “Hallowe’en Party Draws Big Throng of Masqueraders: All Events Pass Off So Smoothly That There is Nothing to Write; Full Account Follows Nevertheless!”

Reprinted here are a few paragraphs, not the full account:

“Reese and Kalil, disguised as firemen, handed all the ladies on and off the ferry. Boots Johnston, attired as a bumpy-legged blonde, received this mark of respect but was unfortunately tripped up the steps by both gallant fire-laddies, or, if he wasn’t, he should have been.

“One hundred and eighteen and more attended the dance and not more than ten were out of costume so you can see for yourself that it was a very enthusiastic party. The dance music was fine and good dancing was had by all.”

Even though the *Islander* reports of mundane activities, like an upcoming “Woodfest” and the election of officers, there follows an odd article about a favorite pet:

“Lowenstein Fish Dies Nameless.”

“The many friends of the fish which Harry captured at the Island a few bright weeks ago will be prostrated to hear that the poor fish died a few days hence, at its residence on 19th street. A friend has written the following obituary which we publish amid the blinding tears:

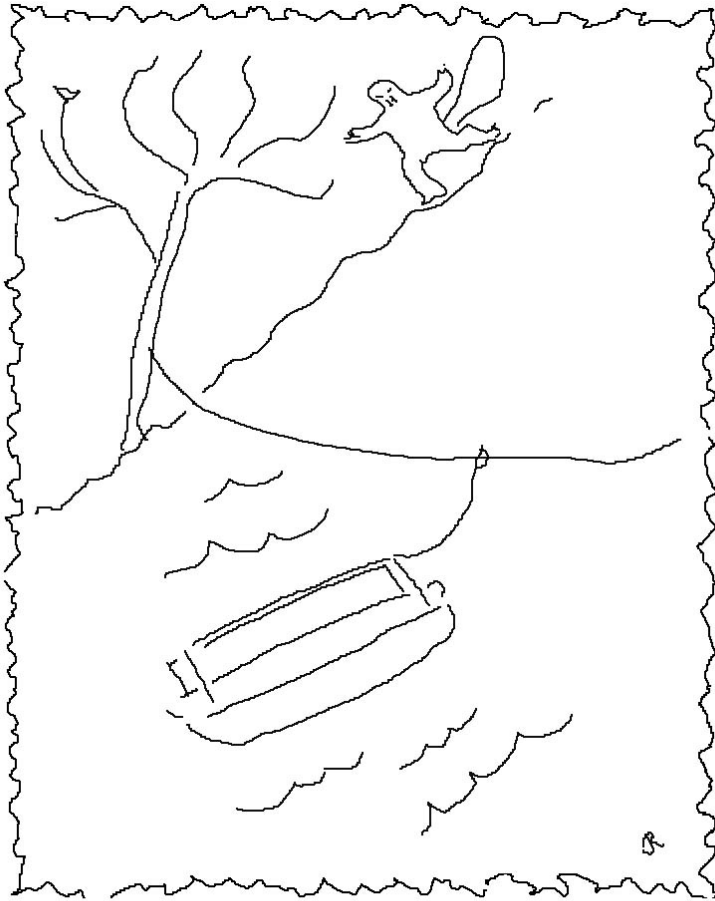
Little fish,
How I wish,
You could swish,
In your dish
You are gone, we loved you so;
Little fish, where did you go?

“This little creature made many friends during its short life,—it had a big heart and a kind face, even if it was only one inch long...”

And, reflecting the Club’s continuing interest in river safety:

“Charlie Falls Overboard Out of Turn”

““Man Overboard!”, that dread cry which strikes a chill to the heart of the bravest mariner but which is getting so common up on the lagoon that the shackers there don’t even bother to listen for the splash, rang out over the wastes of water up by Doc Wendt’s shoot two Sundays ago,—Charlie was over again for the second time this season. Charlie was poling and his pole slipped and then the canoe slipped from under our Charlie. However, we are getting so expert at rescuing that we can pull them out of the water as fast as they fall in and Charlie was soon down at the club-house in dry clothes and wondering what kind of wisecracks the *Islander* would make.”



Ruppert

*—Created by
Johnna Robinson*

*Ruppert has the island to himself,
No One to run the ferry! Volunteer.*

Sycamore Profiles

The Editor is coming to appreciate two realities about the Island's members and wait-listers: (1) They are a remarkable bunch, not least in accomplishments off-Island; and (2) for the most part, the details of that first reality are not known to many *Islander* readers. That needs to be fixed; and the Editor proposes launching beginning in 2005 a monthly feature in the *Islander* profiling a member or wait-lister with off-Island accomplishments that should be known to more people. These will be one to two-page profiles, with pictures, focusing on achievements, especially if they relate to environmental or similar issues of special relevance to the Island. Two desiderata will make that happen: Suggestions of potential profilees and authors (don't be modest!) for those profiles. So volunteer to do a profile and get to meet some of your Island colleagues "up close and personal." And parents: Note that this might be a perfect assignment for your child looking for a writing task – to fulfill an academic requirement or impress the English teacher or buff up the college applications or simply learn how to interview, write it up, and get it published. Contact the Editor: Norman Metzger, 202/544-6027 or normanmetzger@verizon.net

In Touch With Joe...

The big news of the month (for me anyway) is that we fixed the leaky ferry. I decided it was time to fix her right, and to do that we had to take her out of the river. I took advantage of the high water from the most recent hurricane and floated the ferry up onto the Island. The waters receded early the following week, and the big barge was on dry land sitting next to the boardwalk. (It looks a lot bigger on land than it does in the water.) Slowly, the pontoons dried out and I got to work. The down-river pontoon had a large crack along the nose from being repeatedly banged into the steps. I used bolts to close the ten-inch crack as John Matthews suggested and applied a thick layer of epoxy. Of course, this was after I had pumped many gallons of water out of both pontoons. After the epoxy dried I applied fiberglass cloth and resin to both pontoons for good measure. Exactly one week after I pulled the ferry into the shallows, she was ready to be launched again. Gerry Barton, John Matthews, Jim Drew, Tryon Wells, and I were able to push it successfully back into the river. We hooked the chains up and she's looking as good as she ever did. It is so much easier to pull the ferry across the channel now, I can't tell you what a difference it makes, and so far it doesn't seem to be leaking. Having a ferry that works is a good thing; it was really bugging me to see the ferry sitting so lopsided in the water the way it was before.

Did you know that the giant Sycamore (*Plantanus occidentalis*) in front of the canoe shed is about 215 years old! There is a formula to estimate the age of trees based on the diameter at breast height, multiply the diameter in inches by a factor (for sycamores that factor is 4) and get the approximate age. The diameter of our tree is 54"(!) and so, by this formula, our tree is over 200 years old. Not bad, but, according to the forestry division of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, which maintains a champion tree registry for the state and the county, the champion sycamore tree for Montgomery County is at the Dickerson Conservation Park. It has a diameter of 79" and so is over three hundred years old! However, we have a redbud tree (*Cercis Canadensis*) on the Island that is over twice as big as the champion redbud for the county; so, I think I'll send in a nomination for this one. Who knows, we may have a state champion redbud here on the Island. I'm surprised at the variety of trees I'm finding on the Island and it seems that forest management could be part of my job description.

Speaking of forest management, there are some damaging non-native species of vines that need to be addressed. We had a good growing season this year and the wisteria and kudzu have really taken off. The invasives are easier to spot now because they stay green longer than the native plants and I found wisteria with trunks as big as my wrist and kudzu thirty feet up a tree. I know pulling vines is a thankless job but I'm hoping we can work on them during the Workfest.

It has been a wonderful month on the river. The floodwaters receded and left us with the clearest water I've ever seen in the Potomac. It has been a real novelty to be able to view the topography of the river bottom. The winds of the hurricane season have died down and the green water is still and mirror-like most of the time, perfect for reflecting all the colorful trees. The birdlife, as usual, is abundant. The eagles are back, I saw my first red-necked grebe of the season, and I think I just saw a Nashville warbler.



Photos by Joe Hage

Padding *Le Petit Nord*

by John Lentz

Our midnight visitor was all silence and stealth.

The wolf first peered into Ed Gertler's tent. Confronted by those cold, yellow eyes, Ed let out a shout. Joe Lederle and I caught a glimpse of its profile against the dim night sky when a black form passed us by. As we mumbled about grabbing the bug spray for protection, *cainus lupus* vanished into the dark.

Not exactly our hometown region of suburban Washington, D.C., but then we had come to the Bloodvein River for a wilderness experience. The Bloodvein begins its course just west of the gold mining community of Red Lake, Ontario, and reaches Lake Winnipeg, Manitoba, 180 twisting miles later. It flows over the southern section of Canada's vast Precambrian Shield, at about 2.5 billion years one of the earth's oldest rock formations.



Map provided by Mike Lentz

The stream traverses two provincial parks, Woodland Caribou on the Ontario side and Atikaki in Manitoba. The parks hold development in check as the Trans-Canada highway is only 100 miles south. Even in the fur trade days 200 years ago, this area was called the *le petit nord* (the little north), a locale close to civilization. Today, its relative ease of access could lead to heavy development if not buffered by the parks. Happily for us, most of the access was to fly-in fishing camps, and we encountered only a half dozen canoe trips during our two weeks on the river.

The name "Bloodvein" has two possible origins. One is from accounts of early native tribal battles where many were killed and the name "Miskwi Isipi" or "Blood River" was applied. The name "Bloodvein" appears to have been first used in an 1818-19 Hudson's Bay Company journal from the Berens River post further north, but may have an alternate origin, in the veins of red granite that are common along the river.

Ed is an expert canoeist, but Joe and I aren't far behind with almost a century of experience between us. So it came as some surprise that we made a basic mistake on day two. Both of

us thought we could negotiate a rock garden on the river at the finish of some healthy Class 2 action, but we didn't walk the length of the bank to scout. When we entered that last section, I had just a few seconds in the bow to find a way through. I couldn't, plowing into one boulder dead on. With a thudding BONK against the skid plate, canoe and rock met. This part of the Shield held its position, but so did my sturdy Mad River Kevlar canoe which recoiled to a near standstill, leaving us to ignominiously wade through the tailrace.



Joe Lederle (stern) and John Lentz descending a rapid. (Below) Traversing one of the trip's 20 portages. All photos in this article by Ed Gertler.

Since that was the only mishap in 89 rapids, our overall performance wasn't too shabby. The Bloodvein harbors everything from traces of current to boat-eating Class 5 cascades. The pattern is classic "pool drop" with the pool phase ranging from 50 yards to complex 15-mile lakes. All rapids of Class 2 and above had well-cut portages, the longest being about a half mile. We were able to finesse most carries, with our tandem canoe out of the water only about 20 times. Often, Ed would run a heavy stretch in his decked C-1 then give Joe and me a hand on the trail.



An interesting feature of a river through this ancient granite formation is that it takes about the same effort to negotiate the Bloodvein upstream as down. Indeed, we passed two parties going up. They had to paddle against a bit of current to reach each portage and carry uphill, but had the prevailing westerly winds behind them on lake expansions. Sort of a draw.

The unyielding swaths of rock also created some spectacular campsites. After a day at the paddle and on the portage path, it was a joy to hove into these sumptuous spots: level tent sites, lots of firewood, and sweeping river vistas. Twice we had a welcoming committee. First, a moose swam the lake just ahead of us; then, a few days later a beaver gave that distinctive warning slap of its tail against the water before diving into its lodge.

Memorable locations were the three First Nations pictograph sites along our route. Early native peoples must have been equally impressed with the rock formations as they painted cliff walls with drawings of stick figures, animals, and even a huge canoe carrying 19 paddlers. Radiocarbon dated at 800-1,000 AD, the art is surprisingly well preserved. The paint was an indelible bright red ochre mixed with animal fat. A dramatic granite face near Artery Lake on the Bloodvein is world renowned for its depiction of a charging bison, a subject imported from the plains 200 miles southwest (see next page). These pictographs are an important reason why the Bloodvein was declared one of 30 Canadian Heritage Rivers in 1998.

That solid rock foundation with its thin overlay of accumulated soil made for an unstable forest. Most trees did their best to adapt with shallow, spreading roots, but when storms hit they topple in messy cordwood piles. We passed one area where a micro-burst of wind had up-ended almost all the timber, even peeling back the turf like so much outdoor carpet.



The famous Bison pictograph, about 15" long, on the Bloodvein.

Yet, our weather had been glorious with little rain, lots of sunny periods, and none of those persistent headwinds that had been advertised. So it was with some confidence, after reaching our takeout at the town of Bloodvein on the east shore of Lake Winnipeg, that Ed suggested we camp a short distance out on the huge lake - just for the experience. Soon we were atop a rocky island with "Welcome To Bloodvein" painted on it. As we finished supper, I commented I'd never heard much that was good about Lake Winnipeg weather.

As if on cue, the blast hit us later that evening. For 36 hours we were pinned down by lashing winds that transformed the lake into an angry sea. Huddled in our tents, we passed the time waiting for them to shred with an occasional peep out to watch another squall line of rain bearing down on our exposed position.

On the second morning the storm gave us a window to make a run for town. Our faithful charter airline soon appeared to give us a well-earned lift back to Joe's van at Red Lake. Then it was on to home - where wolves hang out in the zoo.

John Lentz has been a Club member for 30 years and is a former Canoeing Supervisor. Since 1962 he has carried out 20 wilderness canoe expeditions to Canada and two to the former USSR.

Roy Sewall is developing a coffee table book called "Our Potomac, from Great Falls through Washington, D.C." that will be published in March 2005. He knows Marcia and George Loeb through the North Bethesda Camera Club, and asked them for help getting access to Sycamore Island for some photos. The book will include this photo by Roy as well as two close-ups of Sycamore flowers by Tom Field. [Note that Renee Dunham is also on board helping to pull the Ferry.] Mr Sewall will come to the February 9th meeting to discuss his book. Mark your calendar!



Photo[©] used with permission of Roy Sewall.

Saturday Relief Caretakers November

November 6, 2004	10:00 a.m. - 2:00	Johnna Robinson	301-229-5421
	2:00 p.m. - dark	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
November 13, 2004	10:00 a.m. - 2:00	Wayne and Cissie Coy	202-686-5778
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Jennifer Urquart and Michael Edwards	202-244-0446
November 20, 2004	10:00 a.m. - 2:00	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	2:00 p.m. - dark	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
November 27, 2004	10:00 a.m. - 2:00	<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

No Large Parties Scheduled for November

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@shs.net, phone: 240- 747-4810, fax: 301-320-4216

Growing Native (con't)

Jen Schill, of Growing Native, provided this additional information for the article on the project in last month's *Islander* (p.10): Leftmost image, credit Ed Tenney. Teresa Maxwell (left) and Kim Davis, co-leaders of Girl Scout Junior Troop 2546 of College Park, Maryland, display a small sampling of the 500 pounds of seed collected by twelve troops at a site in Prince George's County, Maryland, during last year's Growing Native. Middle image, credit Alison McKeachie. Taken at collection at historic Mount Vernon, hosted by Ford and Lincoln-Mercury, sponsors of Growing Native. Rightmost image, credit Bridget Fico. The girls are from "Brownie Girl Scout Troop 607, Reston, VA."



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November 2004

- Marita Thorson
- On the Bloodvein
- Death of a Nameless Fish
- Sycamore Profiles
- A Leakless Ferry



A Peaceful Bloodvein (see p.. 6.) Photo by Ed Gertler