



Joe Claus

Photo and editing by David Winer

The Sycamore Islander

December 2007

Volume 86 No. 12

President's Letter

November promised to be a busy month for the Club, and it was. The Club voted to go forward with the renovation and expansion of the caretaker's quarters and clubhouse and to offer the waiting list a one-time opportunity to join the Club in 2008. These decisions will reinforce the Club's foundations and, I believe, keep the Club vital and healthy for years to come.

December promises to be even busier than November. Here's the rundown:

**Annual Meeting and Holiday Gathering Honoring John Matthews Sr. and Peggy Thomson
December 12, 2007 at 8:00 P.M. At Peggy Thomson's home.
23 Grafton Street, Chevy Chase, MD. Telephone: 301-656-3630**

The December meeting is the time when the club elects officers and supervisors, votes on the budget for the following year, and adjusts dues as necessary. But, more importantly, it is a time when we get together to celebrate the holiday season and honor long-time members who have made substantial contributions to the Club. This year we will be honoring John Matthews, our former captain who worked tirelessly for the club for many years, and Peggy Thomson, an active member in her own right and the wife of the late John Seabury Thompson, who was a pillar of the Club. Among other things, Peggy has hosted the December meeting for as long as I can remember, and we will have the privilege of gathering at the Thomson's house in Chevy Chase one more time on December 12th. While Peggy is providing the venue, we need to help her with the organization and provide food and drink. Larry (the Bootlegger) Heilman has generously agreed to provide the wine and other drinks. I would appreciate it if everyone who comes to the meeting would bring either hors d'oeuvres/light cocktail food or a dessert. We also need a few people to help set up before the meeting and to clean up afterwards. Please contact me by phone or email if you can help with the arrangements — 202-492-2003/jkomarow@covad.net

Update on the Renovation Proposal

As many of you know, the renovation proposal passed with a vote of 38 Yes and 24 No. This is the largest turnout for voting that the Club has had. Whether you voted for or against the proposal, I hope that everyone will come together and work to make the renovation a reality.

The Sycamore Islander is a monthly newsletter of the Montgomery Sycamore Island Club. Any materials of interest to the the membership and waiting list are welcome and should be sent to the Editor, Amanda Cannell, 5901 Cranston Road, Bethesda, MD 20816-1115 . Text and graphics may be sent as email attachments to acannell@norwoodschool.org. Telephone 301-229-8658 or 301-943-2757 (cell).

The deadline for the January issue is Wednesday, December 26

Construction Contract We expect to negotiate and complete the construction contract by the end of the year with construction to start at the end of February.

Borrowing from members and the waiting list Funds for the renovation will be raised through an assessment and dues increase earmarked for construction and by borrowing \$75,000 from members and the waiting list through the issuance of 10-year notes at an interest rate of 7.0%. Thus far, we have expressions of intent for about \$50,000. Make your commitment now before the notes are fully subscribed. You will be helping the Club and getting a good interest rate, too.

Waiting List Memberships During December we will be finishing the details on the one-time opportunity for everyone on the waiting list to become waiting-list members. The 2008 dues notices to the waiting list will include a full explanation of the opportunity and an election form. Whether or not a person on the waiting list elects to become a waiting-list member, the queue for regular membership will remain intact.

Fall Workfest

The Club had a very successful Fall Workfest on Sunday, November 18. The weather was better than expected, we completed most of the tasks on the checklist, and we had a terrific picnic thanks to George Malusky, who manned the barbeque, and the many people who brought great side dishes and desserts. I want to thank Joe Hage; our Captain, Tryon Wells; the members and supervisors who helped organize the Workfest, and, most of all, everyone who came out to participate. We now have a new set of steps from the tow path down to the existing steps to the ferry. Check out the pictures of the Workfest and steps construction in this issue on page 14. Special thanks go to David Winer, who designed the steps and organized the project; Joe Hage, who took care of purchasing the materials and getting them to the Island; and Steve and Matt Newman, Bill Hill, Tove Elfström, Chris Grant, Gerry Barton and Tryon Wells, who lent their muscle and carpentry skills to the project. Dave and others worked until there was no more daylight to complete the work. Their efforts reflect real dedication to the Club. When you look at the pictures, you'll notice a lot of gray hair – a reminder that we need younger people to get involved.

2008 Budget and Dues

This *Islander* also contains the proposed operating budget for 2008 and dues increase to cover the cost of operations. The construction budget and associated dues and assessments were approved in the special vote. The proposed increase in dues for operations is four percent.

Slate of Officers and Directors

The proposed slate of 2008 Officers and Supervisors is on page six of this issue. Some of these are tentative, and the Recording Secretary's position remains open. (Thanks to Sherry Pettie who served as Recording Secretary for two years and now has other commitments.) Nominations can be made at the December meeting for the Recording Secretary and other positions (including the President!). It is not too late to get involved.

Changing of the Guard at the *Islander*

This is the last issue of the *Islander* edited by Norm Metzger. Norm took over from David and Jane Winer with the July 2003 issue and has continued the high standards established by prior editors. The *Islander* is a big component of the glue that keeps us together. I cannot thank Norm enough for his service. Fortunately, Amanda Cannell, who teaches art at the Norwood School, will be filling Norm's big shoes as Editor. See page ten for more on Amanda. (Perhaps Ruppert the beaver will show up again in the *Islander*.) Let's give Amanda our help and support.

-- Jeff Komarow

Proposed 2008 Transitional Operating Budget

The proposed 2008 budget of \$73,000 was developed and reviewed by the Treasurer, the President, the Vice-President, and the Captain. It is an operating budget separate from the budget for the renovation project. In light of the dues increase and assessment required to finance the construction, an effort was made to keep the 2008 operating budget at or below the 2007 budget of \$73,600.

We have budgeted for increases in employee costs for the caretaker, insurance, utilities and taxes -- the costs we characterize as fixed costs (i.e. mandatory costs over which we have little or no control). We have made cuts in some discretionary costs – capital improvements, repairs and supplies, and grounds, where we sometimes have been under budget. We have left money in the capital improvements budget to build a new Captain’s Float and similar projects.

Categories	2007 Budget	Proposed 2008 Budget
<i>Total Expenses</i>	73,667.58	73,000.00
<i>Variable Costs</i>	20,100.00	15,850.00
Capital Improvements	6,000.00	3000.00
Entertainment	800.00	800.00
<i>Islander</i>	6,500.00	6500.00
Construction Project		
Membership	400.00	400.00
Grounds	600.00	350.00
Misc	800.00	800.00
Repairs & Supplies	5,000.00	4000.00
Professional Services		
<i>Fixed Costs</i>	53,567.58	57,150.00
Employee Expenses	32,767.58	33,750.00
Insurance	12,000.00	13,000.00
Tax	2,500.00	3600.00
Utilities	6,000.00	6500.00
Bank Charges	300.00	300.00
Other		

Discussion of 2007 Operations

Explanation of Proposed Increase in Operating Dues

The Proposed Dues and Fees for Operations reflect an increase of approximately 4%. It is based on the collective judgment of the President, the Vice-President, the Treasurer, and the Captain.

2007 Revenues and Expenses

At the November meeting, Jeff Komarow presented the Treasurer's Report in Alan Gelb's absence. Alan reported that:

"Sycamore's regular operating budget for calendar year 2007 was \$73,668. As of the end of October we had spent \$61,170. This is 83% of the total, just about exactly the percentage corresponding to ten out of twelve months. We do not usually have major activities before year-end, but allowing for some expected insurance payments in December we should come out approximately on budget for the year.

"Some expenditures have been lower than budgeted, including capital improvements and grounds. *Islander* spending is on track. Taking into account the completion of some long-overdue painting, our spending on repairs and supplies are, unusually, on or slightly over projections. However, utilities have been costly, and insurance charges continue to mount. So do taxes, especially county property taxes, which have increased steadily in the last years with the rise in area property values.

"Moreover, spending includes two exceptional items. We do not include construction project spending in the regular budget, and in 2007 we have spent almost \$2,000 for architectural plans. We also made a second round of T-shirt purchases (\$899), which will come back to the Club as members buy them. Allowing for these, and considering our regular spending, we would have been a little under budget.

"Turning to the income side, the Treasurer's account has received transfers from the Financial Secretary of \$68,000. This is about in line with the level of income received from dues and charges (last year, these ended up at \$67,000) but is considerably below our approved budget. Dues and charges have, in fact, been below our budget for quite a number of years. The difference has been made up in two ways. First, the Club has sometimes come in with expenditures under budget. Second, we have relied on interest income on our balance and reserves to close the gap. So far, we have earned \$4,500 in interest and dividends on our investments in 2007, for a total income (Treasurer's account) of \$72,500, which is close to, but not quite at, our budget. The net result is that we should carry over to 2008 a reserve of about \$60,000, not too far from the level at the end of last year."

2008 Operating Dues

The 2008 budget was held to approximately the 2007 level. As explained above, 2007 dues and fees were some \$5,000 less than budgeted expenses, which appear to be accurate. The Club cannot rely on earning \$4,500 of interest in 2008 to offset fully any shortfall in dues revenue because (1) we will be drawing down up to 50% of the reserve for the renovation project, and (2) interest rates have dropped and may decrease further. While the Waiting-List Members will be paying dues, we do not know how many people on the waiting list will elect membership and whether we will see larger than usual resignations of regular and senior members due to the addition of the one-time assessment and annual dues for construction. Also, in order to keep the construction dues at a constant level for 10 years, it was assumed that approximately \$6,000 of revenue from Waiting-List Members would be used to replenish the reserve and amortize the notes in the first few years. Further, the 2007 revenue included approximately \$4,000 from Waiting-List passes, which we can no longer count on since the pass holders are likely to convert to Regular Membership.

An increase of approximately 4% in dues and fees for operations closes part of the gap between 2007 revenue (before interest) and budgeted 2008 expenditures, but not all of it, before consideration of dues from waiting list members. To the extent that dues and fees for operations exceed 2008 expenses, the surplus will be used to replenish the reserve.

Proposed 2008 Sycamore Island Club Dues and Fees

ANNUAL DUES FOR OPERATIONS

Regular and Waiting List Members	\$312.00
Senior Members	\$156.00
Inactive Members	\$ 78.00

CONSTRUCTION ASSESSMENT*

One-time Assessment Applicable to Regular, Senior, Waiting List and New Members	\$200.00**
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ANNUAL CONSTRUCTION DUES*

Regular Members	\$ 75.00
Senior Members	\$ 37.50
Inactive Members	\$ 18.75

WAITING LIST FEES

Waiting List Fee	\$ 24.00
Waiting List Pass (includes Waiting List Fee)	\$156.00

OTHER FEES

Application	\$100.00
Initiation (Applies to waiting list members and new members)	\$ 60.00
Canoe Rack (Other than Regular Members)	\$ 30.00
Non-Rack Boat Storage	\$ 15.00

LARGE PARTY FEES

0-10 Guests	No Charge
11-20 Guests	\$15.00
20-35 Guests	\$35.00
More than 35 require special approval of the Membership	

* Construction Assessment and Dues approved by special vote in November 2007.

** Inactive Members will pay the one-time assessment (adjusted after 2008) when they reactivate their membership. One-time assessment applies to all new members who were not assessed in 2008.

**Proposed
OFFICERS and SUPERVISORS
Sycamore Island
2008**

OFFICERS

President -- Jeff Komarow
Vice-President -- Peter Winkler
Recording Secretary -- TBA
Treasurer -- Alan and Caroline Gelb
Financial Secretary -- Lisa Kliefoth
Membership Secretary -- Joe and Tammy Belden
Editor – Amanda Cannell
Archivist -- Holly Syrrakos
Captain -- Tryon Wells
Deputy Captain -- John Stapko*
-- Larry Heilman

SUPERVISORS

Finance -- Bill Eichbaum*
Law -- Maurice Tobin*
Clubhouse -- Karl Kosok
Grounds – Carol Kavanaugh
Carpentry/Painting -- Charles Pill
Website -- Tryon Wells
Entertainment -- George and Shelley Malusky*
Camping/Parties -- John Noble
Canoeing -- Jim Drew
Swimming -- Larry Heilman
Relief Caretaking -- Maxine Hattery*

* To be confirmed

Minutes: November 14, 2007

Due to our extended high temperatures this fall, the November meeting was held on the Island. It was called to order at 8:00 p.m. by President Jeff Komarow.

Present: Gerald Barton, Richard Bertaut, Ann Marie Cunningham, Jim Drew, Tove Elfström, Peter Fuchs, Ned Goddard, Chris Grant, Rosemary Hart, Jeff Komarow, Sandi Komarow, John Kress, Star Mitchell, John Noble, Sherry Pettie, Chuck Pill, Mary Ann Stein, Tryon Wells, Dave Winer, Jane Winer, and Peter Winkler.

Minutes: The October Minutes were approved without changes.

Treasurer's Report: Alan Gelb's report was read in his absence. The main points were that expenses were higher than projected due to rising utilities and county taxes. Alan expects that a dues increase of about \$25 will cover these higher costs in 2008. A question was asked on whether dues cover expenses. The answer was that they do not; the Club relies on interest paid on its financial reserves.

Jeff remarked that this is why he scheduled the vote on the construction project now – so that the costs can be incorporated in the regular end-of-year financial decisions, which will be presented and voted on at the December meeting.

Workfest: Preparations for the Workfest were discussed. Gerry Barton commented on the beautiful design by Dave Winer for the ferry steps platform. Tryon said that this year the Captain's Float would be left out over the winter.

The Vote Debate: After waiting for the ferry to bring over the last of the late arrivals, Jeff opened discussion of the main business of the meeting. He announced that we were here for a debate about and then a vote on whether or not to approve the construction project and financing.

A Revised Proposal: Jeff started by saying that his own concern had been with the high bids for the project. \$250,000 seemed too burdensome for the Club. But a new contractor had been found who bid only \$150,000 – Carlos Hernandez, who has been in business for 20 years. Though his English is not good, Chuck Pill speaks Spanish. The Committee interviewed Carlos twice at the Island, his references checked out favorably, and Carlos spent quite a bit of time at the Island preparing his estimates. The Building Committee feels confident in accepting his bid.

Jeff concluded by summarizing the revised resolution to be voted on. Due to the vastly lower bid from Carlos Hernandez, the lower costs presented in the revised resolution are as follows: (1) that the construction costs are not to exceed \$150,000; (2) that the Club raise up to \$75,000 through loans from members; (3) that each member pay a one-time building assessment of \$200; and that members pay an annual fee of \$75 until the principal and interest on the loans from members are fully paid (expected to be less than the 10 years presented in the first proposal). Here Jeff opened the floor to questions and comments.

Chris Grant asked who the designer was, and whether there are fully articulated construction drawings. Tryon replied that the design and construction drawings were prepared by architect Lynne Iadarola of Archeus Studio in Chevy Chase. Chuck Pill replied that all plans are done, except for the heat pump. The committee has not yet decided on what HVAC system to go with, pending final bids from subcontractors. Chris said he had two concerns: one, that he didn't understand how the bid could be final when HVAC is so very costly, and the second was that parallel prime contracting does not work. Ann Marie Cunningham responded that Carlos will include HVAC in his final bid, so there will only be one contract.

Richard Bertaut had questions about opening the membership to waitlisters, and why the projections showed only 20 new members. Jeff replied that this was his estimate of net new members, based on his assumption

that some waitlisters might prefer to remain on the list, and that some current members will decide that their use of the Island isn't worth the increased costs and give up their membership. Richard asked if the Committee was confident that we'll raise \$75,000 on notes from the membership, and Jeff replied yes.

David Winer at this point commented that the proposal we all held in our hands represented an outstanding piece of very professional work by our president. This comment elicited a round of applause.

Mary Ann Stein asked if the new building will bring increased utility costs. Chuck Pill responded that the utilities may be higher, but will be balanced by better insulation. He reminded the group that we'll be remodeling inside the current footprint, which means there is no new square footage being added.

At this point, Jeff announced that it was 9:00 p.m. and suggested a maximum of 1 hour for debate, and then to hold the vote. When members expressed concerns about the late hour, he revised that to trying for 30 minutes of debate.

Chuck Pill asked for comment on the 'list serve' message sent out today, and Jeff responded that in future we should limit list serve emails to information only.

Jeff then asked for comment first from someone in favor of the proposal.

Comment in Favor of the Proposal: Tryon Wells said the design is a compromise. No one is completely satisfied with it. But the idea that any new construction on the ground level will be permanently ruined by high water is unrealistic. From his experience, flood waters usually last only a few hours and leave only a light film of mud that is easy to clean up. He also commented that the contractor has given us a very good price.

Tove Elfström asked Tyron, "What was the biggest compromise for you?" Tyron responded that he grudgingly gave up membership territory for caretaker quarters, which he thinks should be small.

John Stapko said that this is a lot of money to spend building in a flood plain, especially considering that we're overdue for a 100-year flood. He passed around a book about the Johnstown flood and asked members to look at the photos. John said he was in favor of spending money to make the clubhouse flood proof.

A discussion followed with contributions from several members on the hydrology of floodwaters on the Island. The concept of removable walls was introduced, to allow flow-through of flood waters.

Tryon asked to speak on hydrology. He said that flood waters would do more damage to a building raised on posts than to fixed walls at ground level. He asked us to think about an individual post which would be slammed into with the full force of large objects in the flood, as compared to a large rock in the river which creates a shield of water pressure that helps divert objects around it. But Tryon went on to say that although current plan calls for the two bedrooms at ground level to each have a window facing upstream, he would be open to changing the windows to doors, which could be opened in a flood to allow water to flow unimpeded through the bedrooms.

John Stapko said another objection is that we won't be able to rebuild if everything is washed away in a 100-year flood. Ann Marie responded that under Montgomery County building codes, and considering our 'nonconforming' zoning status, if the clubhouse is more than 50% damaged, we cannot rebuild. But if the Island were declared a historical place, that would increase our chances of being allowed to rebuild.

Comment Opposed to the Proposal: Jim Drew referred to his article in the last newsletter, and said that articulating an opposing view is done with hesitancy because the club is not a place for conflict and advocacy. But as a member you're compelled to express your views. He said that in 1936 when the current clubhouse was built, he's certain that the members did not look around and say "This is an okay clubhouse", but

rather “This is a beautiful clubhouse.” He urged that we vote no on this proposal so we can develop a more visionary plan.

Here several members took objection to Jim’s use of the word “visionary”. They said the plan has been worked on for 8 years and it’s unrealistic to think that someone will come along with a better plan. It just doesn’t work to move the caretaker above flood waters. The choice is this plan or nothing.

Tove had two comments. One was that, in his opinion, we need to move the caretaker out of the flood zone, and any impediments raised to this idea, such as soundproofing common walls, are mere technological issues which are easily solved. He then expressed concern about increased dues. He said his salary would require that he leave the Club if dues go too high.

Jeff Komarow responded to these two points. First, to remind Tove that the alternate plan he favored was voted down, and, second, that in his letter in the November *Islander*, Jeff made a commitment that any members who use the Island will not have to leave over money. He will find a way to keep them as members.

Jane Winer commented that at the meeting where the current plan was selected, Holly Syrrakos (a former caretaker’s wife) was asked which plan she would want and she said she preferred the current plan.

Richard Bertaut said that he was formerly a member of the Building Committee, and his strong feeling had been that the quarters should have been raised, and that he was concerned about flow through. He said that he had come tonight prepared to vote no, but he changed his mind. He has faith in the people guiding this project and will vote in favor. He now thinks we should build something upstream to protect the clubhouse from floods in the future.

Peter Winkler agreed. He said he read what everyone had written in the October *Islander*, and it all made sense. However, since he’s cheap about money, he would tend to be opposed to the project. But these people have spent thousands of hours. If we don’t do this plan, we’ll do nothing.

Another Comment in Favor: Ann Marie Cunningham said she wanted to point out that any benefits of the plan’s design have not been brought out yet. For one, right now the ground-level floor in the caretaker quarters is a hazard. One benefit of this plan is that it will improve this floor, making it more stable and flood friendly.

Richard Bertaut said that the financing plan is masterful. The pain to members is much lower than expected.

Ned Goddard urged members to vote for the plan because the caretaker quarters are in desperate need of improvement, and costs will only go up in the future.

At 10:00 p.m., Jeff announced that it was time to vote. Ballots were collected in a ballot box, and held to be counted until the end of the voting period, which was 2:00 p.m. at the Workfest the following Sunday. This process was designed to allow more members the opportunity to participate in this important decision.

[As you may know, the proposal to go forward with the construction plan and its financing carried by majority vote.]

Your Name Here: Do you want to serve the Club as recording secretary? My commitment of two years service is up next month. Please let me or Jeff Komarow know if you are interested in taking on this important job.

--Sherry Pettie, Recording Secretary

From Holly Syrrakos, Island Archivist

76 Years Ago—From *The December 1931 Sycamore Islander*

It is always remarkable to me how many of the issues the Club faces today are repeated in previous years. The editor lobbied informally for the installation of shades and rugs in the clubhouse—evidently unpopular at the time. Remodeling, repairing, tree removal, floods...

In December 1931, the editor writes, “The lads have been hacking away at trees all this month and there’s plenty to hack since another Sycamore fell down at the lower end of the Island a few weeks ago. So many sycamores along the edge of the Island have fallen down in the past few years that the last Club meeting voted to transplant a few trees from Upper Sycamore Island to the edges of the lower Island. So some time this winter we’ll have a tree planting bee. The idea is to plant elms or some other trees which are apparently indigenous to Sycamore Archipelago and which root deeper than do sycamores. My many friends will be glad to hear that I learned both of those words while employed at the Zoo.”

As to remodeling, the editor writes, “I guess those of you who think the club-room would be improved by roller shades and rugs will just have to keep these items in your lockers and when you’re in the club-room you can bring out your own private roller shade and hang it at the nearest window and you can sit on your own private rug. Personally, I hope for better days.”

Roger Gessford, editor of the December 1931 *Islander*, observed “the first copy of the *Islander* was issued in December, 1921...” Of course, 1931 marked the tenth anniversary of the newsletter. Gessford wrote about the beginnings. “In the first place, it was a nine page affair and included a front cover, mimeographed for which Editor-in-Chief Aubrey Hummer himself traced the stencil; the scene on the cover showing tall trees, a body of water and a couple of gulls, or perhaps they were long-winged ducks.” This month we celebrate 86 years of publication. Granted, it’s not 86 years of uninterrupted publishing, but there are very few gaps in the regular appearance of the *Islander*. This feat is pretty remarkable and the Club is to be congratulated for taking its member outreach so seriously.

...“the first copy of the *Islander* was issued in December, 1921...”

“

Amanda Cannell is now the Editor of *The Sycamore Islander*. Amanda has been a member of Sycamore Island since 1995. She loves to walk to the island from her home and enjoys painting, bird watching and swimming on the island. Amanda teaches middle school art at the Norwood School on River Road with a concentration on teaching painting, drawing and sculpture. She has three children, Tom, Oliver and Louisa, who all enjoy the peacefulness and fun of the island as well.

It’s been a pleasure.

— Norman Metzger

125 Miles Down the St. John River

By John Cunningham

In 1976, an article by John McPhee entitled “The Keel of Lake Dickey” appeared in *The New Yorker*. McPhee, a longtime paddler, wrote about a canoe trip on the upper St. John River in northern Maine. At that time, the Army Corps of Engineers was proposing to build a dam on the St. John near the tiny town of Dickey. Above the dam, a huge lake would be created. McPhee imagined the lake as a boat and the drowned riverbed as the boat’s keel.

But the dam was not built, and the upper St. John remains as the longest free-flowing river east of the Rockies. It is also extraordinarily remote, accessible only by float plane or, as in our case, by truck over Maine’s notoriously rough timber company roads. In 1998, the Nature Conservancy, in what was then the largest transaction in its history, purchased 185,000 acres along 40 miles of the upper St. John from International Paper for \$35 million. Subsequently, a series of separate transactions and land consolidations have extended the Conservancy’s protection of the river to nearly 80 miles and increased total ownership to 188,000 acres.

The upper St. John can be canoed during a relatively short period of time that begins with “ice-out.” When the warmth of spring finds its way into the North Woods, the frozen headwaters of the St. John begin to groan and crack. As the ice fractures, mammoth slabs slowly break away and begin to move with the swollen current. They outpace the thaw, piling one upon the other. Inevitably, pressures build and ice jams are breached, tossing house-sized blocks of ice into the forest and sending massive shards hurtling downstream to sweep away trees, scour banks of vegetation, and reshape the river’s shoreline.

Once the ice is safely out of the river, usually by early May, canoeing becomes possible. The window begins to close fairly quickly, however, for two reasons. First, because it is a free-flowing river, the upper St. John becomes quite shallow once the snow and ice melt is gone. What remains is a small stream in a wide river bed, and a lot of walking becomes necessary. Second, the arrival of consistently mild days leads to the emergence, usually in mid-June, of the alpha predators of the North Woods, the notorious black flies, and it is always a good idea to be out of the woods before they show up.

Like most trips on the St. John, ours began on Baker Lake. The St. John’s source lies above Baker Lake, in Fifth St. John Pond, but between there and Baker Lake, the river is narrow and hazardous due to downed trees that become dangerous “strainers.” Spilling out of Baker Lake, the river was running fast and high, with some introductory rapids mostly underwater. There were six boats in our party, loaded with personal gear, coolers full of food and drink, tarps, cooking equipment, saws and axes, and so on. It was May 20, but the weather was chilly with a light drizzle. It snowed lightly our first night, and there was skim ice in the water buckets the first two mornings.

But each day was warmer than the one before, and we had no more rain. By the fourth day or so, we were paddling in t-shirts under blue skies. The St. John grew steadily wider, as feeder streams poured into it and as it was joined by rivers coming in from Canada. As McPhee said, the St. John has a size and majesty that you don’t expect in a forest river. We saw a few houses and hunting cabins, but mostly there is nothing but millions of trees on either side, mostly conifers at first, but as the river dropped in altitude, we began to see more birch, with their light green leaves standing out. It was easy to spot the signs left by the ice: scars on tree trunks well above the level of the river, flattened vegetation on the banks, and rocks piled up in places where the river turned. And in a few places that were well shaded, there were banks of snow still standing. The most interesting wildlife we saw was a hare with huge feet, designed for walking over snow.

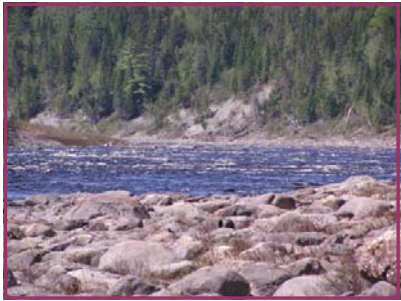
Because the river was running so fast, we achieved our “target” mileage early each day, which left plenty of time to set up camp, nap, read, and explore, before the cocktail hour. The clear and shallow water of the St. John is ideal for practicing the ancient art of poling. Originally used by explorers and voyageurs to move a canoe upstream, the setting pole can also be used to steer downstream, either by pushing off rocks and the riverbed or by sweeping the pole through the water like a paddle. The great advantage of poling is that you’re standing, and it becomes so much easier to see the best path through a rapid or around an obstacle.

Most of the paddling on the upper St. John is on flat water, with the occasional class one or two riffle. There are, however, two rapids that require close attention. Swimming in the St. John -- either planned or unplanned -- is not desirable, since the water temperature is about 50. First, one encounters Big Black Rapid, so named because the Black River flows into the St. John a couple of miles downstream. The high water level meant that the rapid was mostly a series of big standing waves. We entered it a bit left of center, and then gradually headed toward the right bank without incident. Once all boats were safe and accounted for, we sponged out and moved on.

The second rapid, which we went through on our sixth and last day, is called Big Rapid. It is the final exam, since from then on, the St. John widens and becomes a different kind of river, dammed for electric power and diverted for potato farms. The Big Rapid is the most spectacular stretch of white water we have experienced. It is at least a mile long and cannot be seen from start to finish because the river bends sharply to the right about one-third of the way through. Our path was essentially an "S" so that we could avoid some huge holes near the right bank. The Cunninghams did well, spinning out only once against a rock. We could see that once we turned back into the current, we'd be grabbed hard and pushed down a sharp drop. But Ann Marie was ready with a strong brace, and we sailed through. What a blast!

Our take-out was not long below Big Rapid, near Dickey. We drove back to Belfast on the Maine coast, which was our starting point, and enjoyed the traditional end of any river trip -- the forty-five minute hot shower.

Intrigued? Want to know more? Give us a call anytime.



Clockwise from top left:

Author at the Turner Bogen Campsite

Broken ice

Bottom of Big Rapid

Sunrise over the St. John

Ostrich Fern

Snowshoe Hare

Photos by Ann Marie Cunningham

In Touch With Joe....

The winter solstice is still a few weeks away but the seasonal transformation of the Island is complete. The leaves are off the trees and like every year I'm shocked at the amazing difference this makes. My summer canopy is gone and now I have a shallow-arching sun casting long shadows of naked trees. The crystal clear water in the river looks black in contrast to the wintering gulls and the bare white trunks of the sycamores. It's only during these cold months that we see the gulls bobbing on the river, pecking at the surface for who-knows-what. This is also the only time of year to see grebes and other wintering birds. I've already seen a pied-billed grebe and several red-necked grebes as well as a group of buffleheads. The winter is cold and dark and sometimes I complain about the long hike to my car; but I'm always thankful for the way that living down here forces me to experience **and** appreciate all the seasons.



We had another good Workfest, my eleventh. Thanks to everyone who helped! I think in the future we should have a Workfest in early November to get the docks out of the river before the river gets too cold; and then have another workday in early December just for cleaning the gutters and raking the leaves. I do think raking is important, by the way; otherwise, the leaves pile up and kill the "grass".



Photos by Joe Hage

I'm very happy to report that I still haven't seen or heard any ground hogs. Usually around this time of year they are busy getting ready for their long winter nap, but so far I haven't heard them digging or seen them feeding. I don't want to jinx it but maybe they've gone, just as mysteriously as they arrived. The beaver are here for sure though and, like last year, were using their chewing skills to our advantage. At the Workfest John Stepko cut one of the huge silver maple branches that were hanging over the Captains Float. Since the branch was growing way out over the water, most of it was unreachable once it fell in the river. John did what he could to the lower trunk of the branch, but he told me that he left the smaller branches for the beaver to work on. Well sure enough, two weeks later almost all of those branches are gone.

There was a vote this past month to go ahead with the renovations to the clubhouse, and even though I'm not sure if the new floor plan will fit my needs I still want the renovation to go as smoothly as possible. I've tried to remain neutral throughout this process and like many of you I'm apprehensive about the negatives that change can bring; but I also want to look to the positives and I hope that this project, by the time it's done, will bring us closer together and not divide us.

**The Fall 2007 Workfest
Photos by Jane Winer**



...and photos by Renee Dunham and David Winer of new ferry stairs being built



Saturday Relief Caretakers December — January

DECEMBER

1	11-dark	Susan Shattuck Benson	202-546-1016
8	11-dark	Barbara Stott McCoy	301-320-4322
15	11-dark		
22	11-dark	Neil Hennessy	
29	11-dark	Rosemary Hart Craig Iscoe	202-244-5967

JANUARY

5	11-dark
12	11-dark
19	11-dark
26	11-dark
	11-dark

**** Caretaker Volunteers ****

To volunteer, contact Maxine Hattery at 202-362-1361 or hattery@aol.com

Large Parties

None Scheduled

A large party application form may be printed from the Club's web page at
<http://www.sycamoreisland.org/systems.htm>
To request a form through the mail, call the Supervisor of Parties, John Noble
e-mail: johnnoble@comcast.net, phone: 301-448-8562



Photo by Jane Winer



The Sycamore Islander
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Cabin John, MD 20818
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To view this month's Sycamore Islander *in color* on the
Internet, go to:
<http://www.sycamoreisland.org/tschuss/islander.htm>

FIRST CLASS MAIL

Sycamore Events

December Meeting — Wednesday,
December 12, 8 p.m.

Peggy Thomson's Home
23 Grafton Street
Chevy Chase, MD.
301-656-3630

January Meeting — Wednesday, January 9, 8 p.m. Site tbd

N.B. General meetings are held at 8 p.m. on the second Wednesday of the month.



Photo by Joe Hage