



The Sycamore Islander

FEBRUARY 2010 | VOLUME 89 NUMBER 2

President's Letter

There were well more than ten people who came to the January meeting but we were one membership short of a quorum, therefore no official business occurred. Star Mitchell had set out a variety of snacks and beverages for the occasion and we proceeded much as usual with a lively meeting. See elsewhere in this issue for Co-Recording Secretary Ann Marie Cunningham's report of what took place. Much of the discussion related to membership matters for the time when the waiting list dwindles down to zero. I expect we will continue in this vein at the February meeting. Please attend to share your views about this and other related membership topics.

On January 19 the river rose over our 5-foot limit for ferry operations and stayed that way for a week, until it started rising further to peak at 11 feet on January 27. Official USGS flood stage is 10 feet. During the height of the flood our caretaker was called away on urgent business and Captain Tryon Wells and Paul Stanton stepped in to deal with the ferry tow rope. As the river rises the rope across to the Island can become entangled in large trees and other flotsom carried along—so the rope needs to be raised or dismantled to prevent destruction. Thanks to Tryon and Paul for being there when we needed them.

I encourage you to be at Paul Hagen's bird walk on Saturday, February 20. Those of us who bird regularly know about this special time for spending a few hours outdoors in winter. Regardless of whether you are fascinated by birds, an outing like this is fun on different levels—some exercise, some social life, and some breakfast treats. Let Paul know you are coming, and

bring binoculars if you have them. And warm clothes.

Cora Shaw and Bernard Veuthey are hosting the February 10 meeting at their house at 5022 Cathedral Avenue, NW, in the District. Traveling south on MacArthur Boulevard, passing the District line, go approximately a half mile to Cathedral Avenue. There is a small dry cleaner's store on this corner. Turn left (east) for two blocks to 5022. If coming from the District, turn right at Cathedral. The address shows well on Google Map.

DAVID WINER
President

JUST TO REMIND...

Plans for celebrating the 125th Anniversary of the Club continue to evolve. May, not April, is deemed a better month for the party but no firm date has been set. Dressing up in period costumes is encouraged, but not mandatory; the whole family is invited, of course, and for non-dancers, we plan musical interludes between Contra-dancing sets, and games—croquet and horseshoes, for example (tiddly-winks, anyone?), and we therefore call for games volunteers. We have not yet lined up a caller or musicians and continue to welcome ideas, suggestions, referrals (for a caller and fiddlers). Please call Jane Winer 301.229.8963 with your ideas and suggestions.

A Gathering of Islanders

On January 13, a group of Islanders gathered at the home of Star Mitchell for what was intended to be the monthly meeting. Had one more member joined us, we would have had a quorum. Instead, John Membrino, David and Jane Winer, Jim Drew, Lucky and Bill Marmon, Larry Heilman, Jeff Komarow, Cora Shaw, Joe Hage, and Ann Marie Cunningham enjoyed the refreshments which Star graciously offered, and had a very interesting and informal discussion on a number of topics.

Joe reported that there was open water at the foot of the Island, so he was able to commute by canoe, but the open area is shrinking, so if there isn't warm weather soon. . . The ferry itself has been frozen in place for a few weeks, with the channel at the ferry landing is frozen. The water has been turned off, so if you manage to come to the Island be sure to bring drinking water with you.

Jeff reported that there was an error in the treasurer's report that was printed in *The Islander*. The Club is only in debt by 10% of what was reported, which is the good news. The bad news is that the reserve is also only 10%.

Tryon reported, via Joe and Dave, that there hasn't be a Caretaker's Log on the web lately because of a computer problem, which has now been fixed. The first subsequent posting on Saturday, January 16 reports that the ferry is freed from the ice and is now operational.

An animated discussion on the future membership process followed. The waiting list is getting shorter, and within a year or so will have been depleted. Our president, Dave Winer, suggested that it is time to consider whether to have a different process for admitting new members. His goals for a new process would be to have no waiting list and to be able to select members that would contribute to the club, as well as to select new members randomly. He expects that the membership chairman, Peter Winkler, will chair a committee to develop the new process, which would be presented to the Club for adoption. Some of the suggestions were to:

- Find a way to reach into the pool of applicants to find skills that would benefit the club.
- From the pool, select some randomly and some with skills or other positive factors such as young children.
- Those not selected in a given year would have to re-apply.

The ensuing discussions continued with other membership matters:

- Process should make it clear to applicants that the Club expects members to support and participate.
- Change the number of years required for senior membership.
- Consider age as a factor in determining eligibility for senior membership.
- New members would be on probation until they completed a number of volunteer activities.
- The process should be administered in the spirit of the club.
- The application should include a written description of why the applicant wants to join.
- The number of members should be based upon the number of individuals, not households.
- The process should be simple.
- The process should be subjective.
- The process should be objective.

WINTER BIRD WALK

Please mark your calendars for the Club's **Winter Bird Walk** for members and friends on **Saturday February 20, 2010**.

Winter is a great time for birding along the Potomac River and Sycamore Island often hosts a terrific mix of winter residents such as Pileated and Hairy Woodpeckers, Bald Eagles, Nuthatches, and Carolina Wrens. The river in the vicinity of the Island also draws a variety of visiting waterfowl, including Red Head Ducks, Buffleheads, Grebes, and Mergansers. The outing will begin at 9:30 a.m. at the clubhouse. We will walk the Island and part of the towpath and conclude at 11:30 with coffee, pastries and an accounting of the morning's sightings.



For more information or to sign up, contact Paul Hagen, phagen@bdlaw.com.



JOE HAGE

There was a request to allow a Valentine Party for the Canoe Cruisers on February 14. The large party supervisor will be consulted. If approved, all members are invited to attend.

Despite its rejuvenated appearance, the Club is nearing 125 years old. Caroline Gelb and Jane Winer are planning a dance in May. The precise type of dancing has not been decided, but it will depend upon the availability of musicians and callers. Watch *The Islander* for details!

There will be a winter bird walk led by Paul Hagen on Saturday the 20th of February. Birdwatching in winter is so much more rewarding because you can actually see the birds. It's also very likely that you will see some that are quite different than the usual backyard birds.

Other upcoming activities may include a bicycle event led by Rene Dunham and canoe camping on Ruppert's Island with Alan Gelb.

If you have an idea for an interesting program for one of the meetings, please contact Dave Winer. One suggestion is to show *The Call of the River*, a video featuring vintage canoeing and kayaking footage, in-depth interviews with eclectic pioneers, and a captivating narrative, which takes a behind-the-scenes look at what inspires paddlers to answer the call of the river.

Cora Shaw and Bernard Veutheywill host the next meeting on February 10 in the Palisades. Directions are in this issue of *The Islander*.

The attending Islanders then returned to delicious refreshments, and the secretary became too engrossed in conversation to continue taking notes.

Respectfully submitted,
ANN MARIE CUNNINGHAM
Co-Recording Secretary

Notes from the Island

What a month it has been! First we had high water, then we had strong, 40-mph winds, then we had a frozen river, and then we had major flooding!

It all started with that post-Christmas thaw, when the river level shot up to 8 feet. As luck would have it, I was out of town visiting for the holidays but got back just in time to prepare the Island for this significant flood. Seems like more often than not, I happen to be out of town whenever the Island is threatened by flooding.

Thankfully, the river receded and by New Year's Day, things were back to "normal". Then the wind started blowing and the cold began to set in. In one way the strong winds were a blessing, if the river is choppy it can't freeze. It blew hard all that weekend after New Year's but the writing was on the wall and large rafts of ice were soon drifting down the river. By Sunday night, the air went still and those giant disks of ice began piling up in front of the ferry.

I went through the process of turning off all the running water to the club house that night. Once temperatures hover in the twenties for a couple days, there

Saturday Relief Caretakers February 2010	
	11 A.M. – DARK
FEBRUARY 6	Ed Fizdale 202.965.5336 sherry@pettie.net
FEBRUARY 13	Catherine Langer 202.342.1462 ffederal@aol.com
FEBRUARY 20	James Hess & Betsy Cody 703.522.6788 Codyhess1@verizon.net
FEBRUARY 27	Wayne & Susan Limberg 703.533.8639 wplimberg@aol.com



is danger of the pipes freezing, and since water increases its volume by 9% when it freezes, the pipes burst. We definitely don't need that. I drained the entire system and plunged some anti-freeze into the toilets and into the traps in the sinks. I also installed some locks on the bathroom doors to keep people from using them.

I walked out on Monday morning just as the sun was coming up, and discovered the ferry cemented into the river by 2 inches of ice. I surveyed the scene as I contemplated my next move. The ice was much too thin to walk on and even the canoe would break through the ice at the thinner spots and I was not going to try and chop the ferry loose. (Tried that once and the ferry got trapped in the middle of the river.) I heard the geese honking and looked far to my right where the birds had found some open water at the foot of the Island. That's it! I'll carry a canoe down to the bottom of the Island and paddle that narrow lead of open water to the other side! I had to thank the geese for showing me the way.

For nearly two weeks, this was how I came and went on the Island. Every morning chopping my way through the thin ice that had formed by the shore overnight, then slogging up the steep muddy trail back on the mainland. In the evening I'd point my canoe toward the little estuary I'd carved out of the surface ice and glide swiftly home. It was fun at first but it



JOE HAGE

began to wear on me after the first week. One amazing thing about paddling through the ice was that it gave a close-up look at the ice crystals as they formed along the edges where the ice met the open water. The water would freeze into long, angular, and complex structures jutting out into the calm water. When I was wearing my polarized sunglasses, I could see the colorful, prized light as it passed through the varied crystals. It was like looking through a kaleidoscope!

The ice continued to spread and it threatened to close off my escape route from the Island, but that south facing part of the river is more exposed to the sun and never froze over completely. Over by the ferry however, the river ice was a good four inches thick in most places. By the second week of freezing weather, I was able to pull myself across the river on the john boat. When I say “over”, I mean on top of the ice like a dog sled.

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JOE HAGE



JOE HAGE

Eventually, the river ice thawed and I was able to use the ferry once again. Then, on the 24th of January, the entire Potomac river water shed received a whole bunch of rain. I never got the official reading of how many inches fell, but it was enough to bring us the highest river level that I have seen since I moved here to the Island! Predictably, I was away in California. It was pretty stressful to imagine the Island going under water and being helpless to do anything to prepare. Luckily, this club is blessed with some very talented and dedicated members. I was so relieved to know that Paul Stanton and Tryon Wells were here to get everything ready in my absence. It was quite a chore, too. I think Paul must have spent at least three hours moving canoes and rescuing tables and other stuff. The river was so high that he and Tryon were forced to take

down all the ropes that were hanging over the river. If the ropes are in the water they catch all of the debris that's coming down the river and that is bad news. The bell rope came down and the tow rope for the ferry also had to come down. I returned home in time to see the river crest and then quickly retreat. There was not any real damage to the club but there is a lot of clean up that needs to be done. There is slimy mud everywhere and there are a lot of trees, branches, and debris all around. There are many canoes that need to be cleaned out and righted, and of course we have the big job of reinstalling the ropes for the ferry. We may have to plan an emergency clean up day.

Never a dull moment when you live on an Island.

JOE HAGE

Sycamore Island Ferry Service

Last Tuesday morning, January 26, I met fellow club member Paul Stanton at the MacArthur Boulevard parking lot at Joe's request. Joe, who was away on family business, had nevertheless been keeping an eye on river levels and had called us both to do whatever we thought necessary regarding the pull-rope and ferry.

Tools in hand, we discussed our options as we descended the trail. I had noted just before coming that the USGS gauge at Little Falls was reading 9.8 feet. When we got to the towpath, we could see that the pull-rope was less than a foot above the raging current and could soon become snagged with river debris. The projection was for a flood crest of 11 feet the next day (which came true).

After a little discussion, we decided to unhook the pull-rope in order to save it. Paul took his canoe over to the Island, and after a short while, managed to disconnect the pull rope from its anchor. Joe had left the ferry tied up on the Maryland shore, so from its deck, I pulled the pull-rope onto the ferry. Paul then took a

tour of the Island to secure picnic tables and loose boats so they would not be lost in the high water.

Which brings us into the present. The pull-rope is in the process of being re-attached and waits for better weather (blizzards are forecast) and lower river levels.

TRYON WELLS



JOE HAGE



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The Sycamore Islander

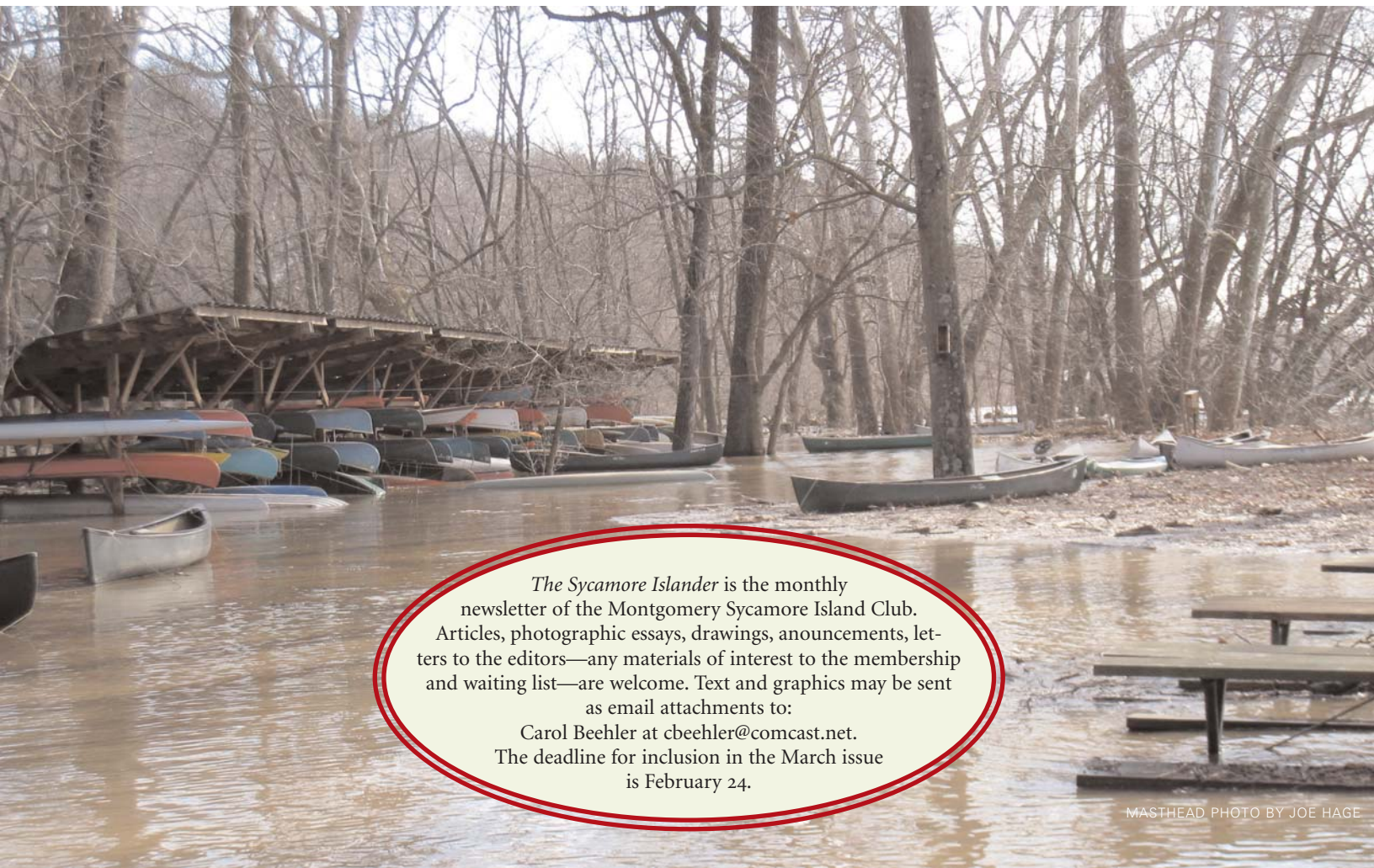
6613 80th Place
Cabin John, MD 20818

ADDRESS SERVICES REQUESTED

FIRST CLASS MAIL



JOE HAGE



The Sycamore Islander is the 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. Text and graphics may be sent as email attachments to:
Carol Beehler at cbeehler@comcast.net.
The deadline for inclusion in the March issue is February 24.

MASTHEAD PHOTO BY JOE HAGE