

Raft Race Fulfills Fantasies Of Long Ago

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By Charlie Griswold

DEEP RIVER — The time was Saturday, July 24, and the place was the Deep River town landing. The event was the long-awaited 2nd annual Conn. River Raft Race.

With banners flying and crowds cheering, the gun sounded over the flotilla of some 20 rafts of all shapes and sizes. Some powered by sail, some by oars, some by pure will power, the masses of wood, barrels and half naked bodies made their way down river into what turned out to be a glorious summer afternoon.

This author had no way of telling, for he was still frantically assembling his raft as the starting gun sounded, but many of the rafts were so well devised that they left the main body of contenders far behind. The winning raft was a fantastic feat of ingenuity, sporting not only sails and professional crewing oars, but a paddle wheel powered by two modified bicycles and a figure head that would have put the Vikings to shame.

A good northerly breeze took the sailing rafts well out into the river, and for those of us toward the rear, presented a grand view of many billowing square rigged sails being inexorably carried downstream.

For some, the rafting fulfilled many Huck Finn fantasies of river travel the way it once was. The slow steady flow of water carrying its

cargo past high hills and cliffs, past islands and marshes, with a solitary vulture circling effortlessly overhead, seemed a momentary throwback in time into an era when men on rafts waited patiently to follow nature's currents.

As rafts passed one another in midstream, a few words and perhaps a few beers were exchanged in a feeling of common purpose; to pass a lazy summer afternoon gliding downriver on a home-made raft.

The spirit of competition ran high among the front runners as a trophy and a large pot of chili awaited the winners, but for some, the race finished long before Nott Island. For many, just crossing the finish line was a major accomplishment, but each raft was greeted in turn with uproarious cheers and a bugle call as they either ran aground just before the finish line, or broke up just after.

After talking to one of the co-ordinators of this year's race, it seems that next year could see the largest raft race in the Northeast, and between now and next summer, many mental wheels will be grinding out their own interpretations of the ultimate raft.

For myself, the list of necessities will include a boatload of good friends, a stiff northerly breeze, and a comfortable deck chair from which I can lustily take in the 3rd Annual Conn. River Raft Race.