

5/78 OLD LYME SAFF

Raft Race Organizers Anticipate

150 Entries In 4th Annual Event

By Dick Lehr

ESSEX - A century ago the Mississippi may have preoccupied Huck Finn's imagination, but the past few years has seen the state's own Connecticut River capture the attention of increasing numbers of modern day rafters who come July will rally a fourth time for the Fourth Annual Great Connecticut River Raft Race.

Already the Race Committee is preparing for the July 22 racing date, and if the race's brief history is any indication, this year's regatta could well prove to be one of the state's top recreational events of the summer.

Since its inception three years ago the race has grown annually by almost 300 per cent - tripling from seven rafts in 1975 to 10 in 1976 to 57 last year. In keeping with that record, this year 150 to 200 entries are expected.

In order to accommodate the mushrooming popularity of the event, the Race Committee has begun to take certain steps to insure a smooth run for the start of the race.

"We're more serious about it

this year. We've got about 10 committees meeting and working out the details - promotion, safety, entertainment, clean-up, traffic control, and so on - right now there are about 40 people involved," Bob Spagnola, who is in charge of promotion, said earlier in the week.

Spagnola said the organizers have also incorporated into Annual Connecticut River Raft Race Association Inc. The group has already applied for a permit from the Coast Guard for the race.

The failure of the race committee to get a Coast Guard approved regatta permit last year threatened to end the race before it started. Coast Guard officials who were at the Deep River landing last year agreed to fine race chairman Frank Burton instead of closing down the race.

Spagnola said one of the group's chief concerns at this point is working out parking for the day of the race.

"We're going to try to arrange it so that people park out of town," Spagnola said.

Calling the race a "participatory event," Spagnola said the

committee was trying to attract those people who will actually be competing in the raft race.

"We hope that most of the people who show will be active in the race. For this reason we're not planning to do a lot of advertising. This isn't a rock concert. We'll look for some good coverage the day of the race. But we don't want the Meridan chapter of the Huns coming down here," Spagnola said.

Spagnola said the race was originally founded for two reasons: to have fun and to raise money for charity. Last year two charities, Big Brothers of the Valley-Shore and Newington Children's Center, each received donations of \$550 from the race's proceeds.

This year three charities are in line for donations, the Childrens Home again, and in addition, Ducks Unlimited and the Ben Haven School for Retarded Children.

While the race's growing popularity has called for better planning than in the past, Spagnola is
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Point Of Raft Race: To Have Fun

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quick to point out that the race's organizers do not intend to lose sight of the original goals.

"We're stressing these two points. We don't want this to turn into an organization just for charity. It was conceived to have fun and this is still the main point," Spagnola said.

Past races have fostered their share of good times and tall tales. Most rafts are made on oil barrels or Styrofoam, but one raft last year was built on 345 plastic milk jugs. Another raft had a crew of 52, each of whom stroked one of the rafts 22 sculling oars.

Some of the raft's very names - "The Waterbed," "Happy Hour," "Cirrhosis of the River,"

"Out to Lunch Bunch," Wet Dream III," and "Fat Chance," speak to a certain degree of the event's "rafter" madness.

The race, as in the past, will start at high noon at the Deep River town landing. The course runs some six and one half miles downriver to Knotts Island off of Steamboat Dock in Essex.

On the island there will be a keg of beer with a pewter mug. The first crew member to reach that mug (and the raft that carried him or her there) is declared the winner. A party for all participants then follows.

The relatively general regulations for the Fourth Annual call for the rafts to be handmade with no manufactured hulls and have a

crew of at least three persons.

The rafts can be no larger than 36 feet by 12 feet and no smaller than 8 feet by 4 feet. Each entry must have a captain who is over 18 years old, and each crew is responsible for its own food and drink.

There is a \$20 entry fee and an additional \$5 per person per crew that is paid the day of the race. The deadline for entry to the race is July 9. All entries should be addressed to P.O. Box 110, Old Saybrook.

"We get lawyers and doctors racing. Most of the bars in the area sponsor a raft. There was even a girls raft last year that came in second. They come from all walks of life," Spagnola said.