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First this year? An all-woman crew from Deep River works on this year's entry of the River Queen 111. The Queen placed third two years ago and second last year.

The crew includes Capt. Marilyn Beard (sitting), Nancy Simone, Patsy Hamel-Gifford and Sharon Bates. (Press Photo by T. Dean Caple)

140 Entries Ready for Saturday's River Raft Race

By JEFF KOTKIN

The starter will not say "gentlemen, start your engines," — engines are not allowed. The call may be closer to "gentlemen, ladies and everyone else, man your oars, sails and bicycle pedals. The fourth annual Connecticut River Raft Race is about to begin."

That warning will be given out Saturday at about noon and soon afterward about 140 homemade rafts will begin the 6½ mile trek down the Connecticut River from Deep River to Essex in an event that has rapidly become one of the biggest of the year in the Valley Shore.

Race Chairman Frank Burton Jr. estimates that 1,400 participants and over

4,000 spectators will crowd in along the river bank to watch the odd conglomeration of boats vie for the first place trophy.

"It has always been a fun thing and it is probably the best thing on the shoreline this summer," Burton said. "It is definitely the biggest raft race in New England, at least that I have heard of."

The fastest rafts will probably make the trip down to Essex in about one hour and the most leisurely ones will take closer to three hours, but when they finish a giant party awaits them at the finish line, Nott's Island in the river just off Essex. The race committee will provide eight bands and the Essex Lions Club will make food and drink available to participants and spectators.

In order to reach the island, spectators should first park in the Verplex parking lot off Exit 3 from Route 9. Shuttle buses will then be available to carry them down to the dock in Essex where a launch will be ready to take them to the island. Burton said the committee will request \$3 from each person taking the launch.

In addition the committee will collect money from all the participants. There is a \$1 application fee, a \$20 raft fee and a \$5 fee for each crew member. Proceeds will go to four state charities — the Big Brothers and Sisters of the Valley Shore, the Newington Children's Hospital, the Ben Haven School in New Haven and Ducks Unlimited.

"We are the only race that I have heard of that raises money for charity," Burton says. "The organizations that we give money to have to deal with children and can receive no federal funds."

When all is said and done on Saturday, Burton hopes that the race will have raised between \$6,000 and \$8,000 for the various charities.

Such a goal seems incredibly ambitious for a race that began three years ago with six contestants. That year the race raised little over \$200 that was divided between two charities. In 1976 the race grew a little, to 17 boats, and raised \$250 for each charity.

Last year it "began to catch on like wildfire," Burton says and raised \$550 for each participating charity. Almost 5,000 people came to Essex and Deep River last year to either ride in or watch the rafts.

But with the increased size last year came some new hassles. Just before the race was to begin the Coast Guard asked Burton to call it off because he had not obtained a regatta permit. "I told them here is the bullhorn and the people are over there — you tell them," Burton said. The Guard allowed the race to go but nearly two weeks afterward Burton received a letter saying that he was arrested and would be fined \$150 for staging the event without a permit.

Burton wrote back explaining all the safety precautions the committee had taken and the Coast Guard agreed to only put him on probation, for a year, "whatever that means," he says.

This year, however, Burton has his permit along with music, food and drink on the island, the first time he has even done that. In addition, even though the race has never had an accident, the committee will have three doctors, seven rescue boats and seven paramedics on hand just in case.

Although expenses have risen significantly this year, creating an extravaganza out of what used to be a small race among friends, Burton has no second thoughts about the increased work involved in organizing it.

"It is really a source of pride," he says. "It is a lot of work not just for myself, but for a lot of people. The amount of cooperation has just been staggering. No one ever envisioned it becoming so big, but it is all very pleasing."

About 40 people will have put in a substantial number of hours in organizing it before the money it totaled, Burton says. Their efforts began with meetings back in January.

Participants start even earlier, however. According to Burton people begin building their rafts in September which can be no larger than 12 by 36 feet, and spend up to \$3,000. Included among those on the rafts will be representatives from three different chapters of the Elks, including the "Jolly Corks" out of Westbrook, people from Pratt and Whitney and Electric Boat and Charles Duffy, Deputy State Commissioner of Commerce. Also, U.S. Rep. Chris Dodd will probably be a specta-

tor. Participating boats can use styrofoam, wood and barrels for floatation and paddlewheels, oars, sails and other devices for propulsion. Propellers or motors, however, are forbidden.

"There are some outrageous boats out there," Burton said. One boat had a 12-foot paddlewheel last year and another had one driven by two ten-speed bicycles.

Last year's winner, the Morning Star III, had 12 rowing stations and a huge spinnaker. That boat will be back this year. But Burton says to watch out for the River Queens III, a crew of all women from Deep River that finished third two years ago and second last year. It uses oars and sails. Other contestants will travel from as far away as New Jersey and Maine to compete.

Burton says that about 20 percent of the boats entered will actually be trying hard for the first prize. For the rest, the day will be a scenic cruise down a river, probably a good tan, a contribution to charity and last, but not least, a good party at the end. Burton says that the last launches will be returning at about seven in the evening, but for many the party may continue all weekend.