

The Raft Race In Retrospect

The Nature Of Things

By Steve Gephard



The Connecticut River Raft Race has become somewhat controversial. In my June 28 column, I discussed some of the problems of the event with an emphasis on environmental matters such as littering. I made several suggestions on how to deal with the problems and Frank Burton, the race's organizer, later told me that many of the suggestions had already been implemented. We agreed to get together after the race and let him tell his side of the story.

We discussed each of my suggestions, as they appeared in print. (1) Establish a ceiling for the number of entrants: A ceiling of 100 has been established.

(2) Entrants be given a sheet explaining problems and demanding orderly and non-littering behavior: Several pages of rules are given to each contestant, including the prohibition of glass containers and discarding litter into the river.

(3) Violators should be barred from future races: This has been done in several cases and close records are kept of rafts. Frank is particularly sensitive to entrants abandoning rafts on the river after the race is over and he has made arrangements to have all derelict rafts hauled out of the river, have them identified, and bar any person involved with such rafts from future races. He was disturbed to learn that there still was a raft on the Lyme shore north of Nott Island and promised to look into it.

(4) The organizers should operate a trash scow: Frank said that it is impractical to collect trash during the race, on the river, but that all trash is collected from Nott Island and ferried ashore the next day. Frank stated that he has a letter from the DEP that thanks him for a fine clean-up and states that Nott Island has never been that clean. He did mention, however, that most of the clean-up immediately after the race and the next day was done by a small number of race officials and that very few contestants helped out. He also confessed that many cans did get into the river this year because bags that were left near the tide's reach were ripped apart by rats.

(5) The event should not be billed as a spectator event: Burton

agrees and did not do so in 1979. He stresses that it is a participatory event and has already cancelled the beer concession for the 1980 race. He was upset when the Tri-Town Lions group sold beer by the can, which compounded the litter problems. They were supposed to use kegs.

(6) Organizers should sit down with Essex officials and try to make agreeable arrangements and keep the town informed of plans: Frank agrees and says that he tried to do so this year and states that the well-publicized trouble with the Town of Essex was actually trouble with just a few individuals, including the First Selectman Dick Riggio, who was "less than fair," in the words of Burton. Frank states that the Essex Businessmen's Association voted 34-2 to support the race.

In spite of this, Riggio told me, in a phone conversation, that he felt that he was representing the predominant point of view in Essex but added that everyone worked together and that he felt quite comfortable with the 1979 race, which he labeled "the best ever."

The Raft Race hired police in Deep River and Old Saybrook as well as three in Essex, a number that resident State Trooper Natrass felt was sufficient. Riggio hired many more for the town but Burton feels they were not needed or visible. Frank, however, is optimistic that his troubles with Essex are over and does not anticipate future conflicts or controversy.

I also recommended that some of the profits go into LOCAL charities and Frank informed me that past donations have gone to the Connecticut River Foundation (Essex), the Essex Ambulance Association, the Mount St. John School (Deep River), and Ducks Unlimited to study the disappearance of the eider duck from the Connecticut River. Proceeds have also gone to the American Cancer Society and the Newington Children's Hospital, a favorite of Franks. None of the recipients are federally-funded.

Despite earlier reports, the profits of the 1979 race were quite low and the donations have not yet been made. Frank plans to organize a benefit dance from the meager race proceeds and the profits from that will go to the charities. Details on the dance are forthcoming.

I think that this race deserves to continue. Its goals are admirable and the event is enjoyed by a significant portion of the community, just as are shad bakes, church events, and dinghy races. The event is not for everyone and might well be rated "R", for with all the drinking, occasional nudity, and other characteristics of parties in the 1970's, it is not appropriate for younger folks.