

# 22nd river raft race has a stately drift

By **BILL DALEY**  
*Courant Staff Writer*

**ABOARD THE RAFT AMERICA** — Lee Goldberg was incredulous: Raft after raft of partyers was floating by, stereos wailing, beer flowing, but everyone was, well, just standing there.

"If this were in California, they'd be dancing by now," the North Haven resident said. And in Chicago, where she lived until two months ago, things would definitely be rowdier.

Maybe it was just the hour, 10:40 a.m. Maybe it was just Connecticut, where even a free-wheeling non-sensical jaunt down the Connecticut River off Middletown can still somehow maintain a whisper of Yankee reserve. Maybe everyone was waiting to cut loose at the post-race party at Dart Island State Park.

Or, maybe — just maybe — The Great Connecticut River Raft Race has grown up.

There was a certain sense of maturity about Saturday's race, the

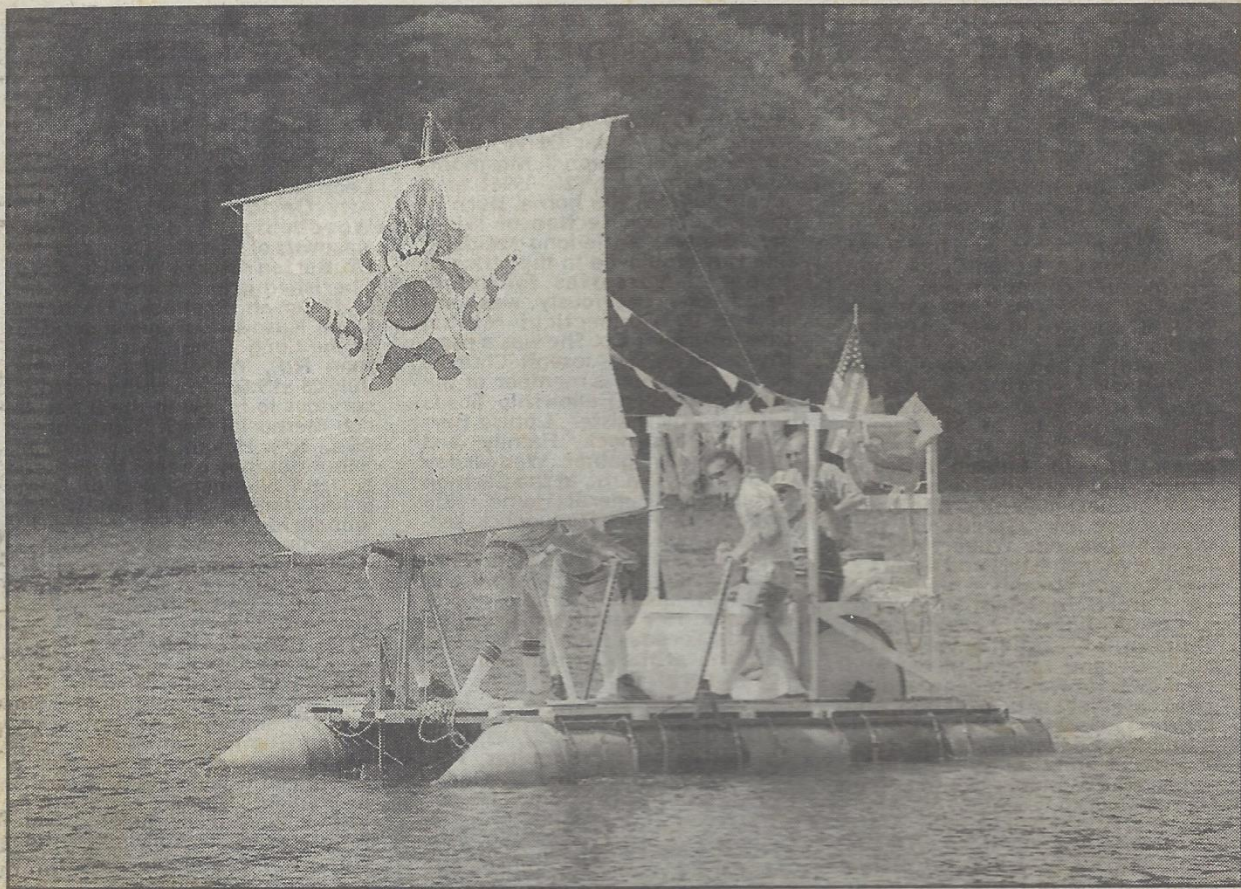
22nd since the idea floated up during a barside chat among friends, and 25 hand-rigged rafts were floated in the waters off Essex. It was the third since the race was moved to a 4-mile stretch of river bordered by Middletown and Portland.

Saturday's race was not in the spirit of raft races of old where excessive partying on and off the river by rafters and thousands of like-minded spectators raised the hackles of local officials and worried the Coast Guard. Folks seemed to know what they were doing — many were old hands in the race — and a few were even talking about pacing their morning beers with an eye to the inevitable drive home hours later.

People were being so mellow that Edward Bruce of North Haven, Raft America's skipper and a race organizer, felt prompted to make an announcement on the public address system as his vessel glided past Middletown's Harborpark.

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Cloe Poisson / The Hartford Courant

■ The Lee Lin, an entry in the 22nd annual Great Connecticut River Raft Race, makes its way Saturday toward Dart Island, a state park in Middletown, the finish line for the event. All entries in the race were homemade and powered by paddles, oars, paddle wheels and sails.

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"Wave to the spectators, everybody. Be polite," Bruce urged in a tone rather tongue-in-cheek.

"If that was the Portland side I would," joked Edward Kalinowski, Portland's first selectman. Laughing heartily, he then turned and waved theatrically toward Middletown's shore.

There was a palpable sense of slightly raunchy fun as more than two dozen wildly dissimilar handmade craft gathered at the Arrigoni

Bridge near the railroad trestle made famous by Billy Joel in his "River of Dreams" video.

There were two-tiered party boats loaded with people, small paddle-wheeled craft powered by pedals, a raft that looked like a Viking longboat, even a rustic log-topped raft complete with pup tent.

The race started with the boom of a small cannon, which came suddenly during a trumpet rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Some boats were no-nonsense, such as "Triceratops," which crossed the finish line first in 37 minutes. Others, particularly the larger party boats shepherding the race, were far more leisurely in engaging the chase.

Sporting a cocked hat trimmed in gold braid and medals, raft race President Malcolm Chapman of Middletown looked like a rakish pirate as he piloted his motorized vessel, which came complete with a portable lavatory on deck, to the race's starting point.

Though the raft race is strictly nonprofit — \$700 worth of donations were made last year from race proceeds — old-fashioned American entrepreneurial spirit wasn't missing from the race.

Once again, a red boat proclaimed the unofficial presence of Middlefield's Red Dog Saloon. Kelley's Cafe of Thomaston was mentioned on the sides of a large green raft called "Bottom's Up."

Even Raft America was turned into something of a commercial for tequila. The wife of a crew member works for Heublein so the raft was festooned with Jose Cuervo memorabilia, from T-shirts to boxers to pennants to stick-on tattoos, which a number of young ladies were sporting just above, on, or just below the necklines of their swimsuits.

For Goldberg, her first raft race was a good time.

"It's better than I thought it would be and it's a perfect day and the people I've met are fun," she said.

## Pre-dawn protesters target base

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The three nuns and