

# When Canoeing Was A "Relapse Into Primitive Barbarism"

**T**RENTON, N.J.—  
Montana and  
Washington are being admitted as the 41st and 42nd states. Johnstown, Pa., residents are recovering from a devastating flood. On the Delaware River, Trenton, N.J., residents are enjoying their new canoes.

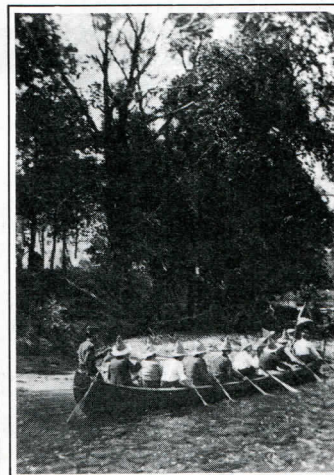
A glimpse into this late 19th-century life has recently been made possible by the discovery of "magic lantern" slides (forerunners of today's 35-mm slides) depicting 1890s activities of the Park Island Canoeing Association.

With the sport of canoeing gaining in popularity, the Victorian passion for organizing prompted several leading Trenton gentlemen to form area canoe clubs. Some of the New Jersey clubs formed were the Newark Canoe Club, the Ianthé Canoe Club, and the Red Dragon Canoe Club.

A favorite campsite, situated two miles north of Trenton, was 28-acre White's Island. Shaded by magnificent old trees, yet only 50 yards from Pennsylvania and 100 yards from the New Jersey shore, the island was considered as secluded as any spot in the Adirondacks. In July 1889, the island was advertised for sale. Twenty-eight prominent Trentonians, already members of several canoe clubs, organized themselves as the Park Island Canoeing Association (P.I.C.A.) and purchased the island. Renaming it Park Island, the group soon incorporated, planned a clubhouse, and ordered a war canoe from the Ontario Canoe Company.

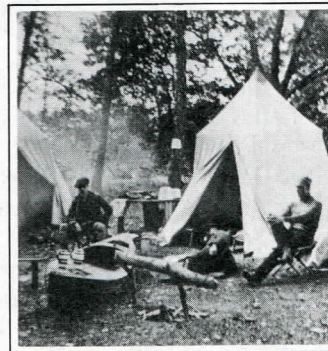


Boas Collection photos



4:30 P.M., April 14, 1890: Ringing telephones and scurrying messengers summoned the association's members to the freight station to receive their war canoe. Soon the craft presented a stately appearance gliding swiftly and silently through the waters of the Delaware, responding to the paddles rising and falling in unison. The club named its new bright-red showpiece the *Wab-wab tay-see* (Fire-fly).

*Above: On the Delaware in 1896. Left: The PICA war canoe, Wab-Wab Tay-See, circa 1890. Below: Campers' dinner bour, circa 1891.*



The Fire-fly was patterned after the first war canoe of its kind, the *Unk-ta-bee* (Lord of the Water), built for the Toronto Canoe Club. With sides gracefully curving upward and outward like the petal of a rose, the craft measured 30 feet long and four feet, two inches wide. Weighing only 400 pounds, the five-fathom canoe (as the Indians would call it) could hold four tons. There was seating for

24, of which 18 could wield single-blade paddles.

Controversy sparked as paddlers from Philadelphia, Rochester, Yonkers and Washington clubs each claimed they had secured the first big war canoe in the United States. Regardless of who actually ordered first, the *Wab-wab tay-see* was the first war canoe to arrive and be launched in the States.

Called a "relapse into primitive barbarism," the typical 1890s camp of a canoe enthusiast reflected a touch of luxury. The setting on Park Island was no exception as members established camps for the summer. By June 1, large double-walled tents with kitchens and porches would appear along with individual tents of all descriptions. Here families would spend vacations and take outings from a day to a week. During the summer the men would take the trolley from downtown to boat houses, change clothes, and paddle to camp each evening. The reverse sequence the next morning kept Trenton's commerce moving.

Unmarried members' tents were located in a row on the island's southeast shore in an area affectionately known as "The Slums." These well-tempered paddlers were noted to be potentially good husbands because of their splendid physical condition, and their ability to cook, wash and sew. Located a respectable distance away were several streets of family tents. Similar camp layouts were found at American Canoe Association meets, where the addition of "Squaw Point" for the ladies' tents was erected. Pickets would patrol the shores to keep away uninvited guests.

For several years Park Island was the site of the Atlantic Division of the American Canoe Association's meet. In 1899, P.I.C.A. members erected 40 large tents with floors, cots and blankets to partially house the participants. Meals for less than 50 cents each were obtained at a large mess tent, 40 feet long with tables and benches for 60.

Travel arrangements to the



meet involved shipping canoe and "duffle" by train or boat to a site near the meet. Often a combination of transportation modes was used, including paddling some distance. In later years, the Atlantic Division's meet to Park Island began with a 44-mile overnight cruise from Easton, Pa., down the Delaware River.

From Saturday, May 27 to Tuesday night, May 30, leisurely activity and social amenities prevailed on Park Island for the big meet. Saturday afternoon and evening was set aside for the arrangement of camps and general good fellowship. Sunday saw an excursion 10 miles up the Pennsylvania Canal returning on the river. In the evening a musical program was followed by William C. Lawrence's magic lantern slide exhibit titled "Camping and Cruising." General sports occupied Monday, followed by the camp orchestra's concert in the evening. A campfire and smoker concluded the evening. On the final day, Tuesday, the long-awaited regatta was held at two o'clock. These events were planned with sufficient time in between to alleviate fatigue:

First - Double-blade paddling race, any canoe, quarter-mile

Second - Tandem, single-blade paddling race, any canoe, quarter-mile

Third - Hand paddling, 100 yards

Fourth - Tail-end race, 100 yards

Fifth - Upset race, 100 yards

Sixth - Swimming, 100 yards

Canoeing on the Delaware declined with the coming of the automobile and the passing of these early paddlers. In 1914 the P.I.C.A. held its last big party in observance of its 25th anniversary. The Trenton Rotary Club acquired the island in 1918 for use as a children's camp.

Today, silent and overgrown, the island rests in quiet majesty, reflecting back on its carefree, leisurely days when canoeing was Trenton's rage.

— Ray Boas



*Students at a Rescue 3 training course practice supporting each other in knee-deep whitewater.*

## River Rescue Workshops

# Disaster Just For Practice

**D**ENVER, Colo. —

It could have come straight from a paddler's nightmare. One boater, leg shattered, lay stranded on a boulder in mid-stream. Another, just downstream, was trapped against a bridge abutment and beginning to panic, even showing signs of hypothermia. Between the victims and safety was a dangerous set of rapids, and the water was rising.

In this case, the disaster was just for practice. The victims, with only imaginary injuries, were participants in a swiftwater rescue course held recently in Denver, and the "dangerous rapids" were a stretch of quietwater on the South Platte River. Within minutes, using techniques taught at the rescue course, a team of students had the disaster victims safely on shore and receiving treatment while the instructors set up another situation for practice.

While these disasters were for training purposes, real broken bones and stranded boaters are a reality in the river world. In just two weeks during the summer of 1978, six rescuers lost their lives on eastern rivers while attempting

to rescue other boaters. In fact, of the 8,000 annual drownings in the U.S., a full one-third are would-be rescuers. Many years of confronting such situations and a strong belief that many deaths could be prevented through proper training has led to the formation of the California-based Rescue 3.

The Rescue 3 goal is simply stated: to reduce the number of drowning deaths in river-related accidents through proper training. A big step toward achieving that goal has been the advent of Swiftwater Rescue Technician courses. Those offered by Rescue 3 are intensive three-day training programs certified by both the U.S. Lifesaving Association and the Rescue Instructors Association. The courses are now offered in 60 cities across the country, from Ohio and Virginia to California and Alaska.

A major part of the program's success has been its "hands-on" approach. A total of 22 out of the 30 class hours are spent in practical application of swiftwater rescue skills. "Moving water is a dynamic medium and each rescue situation will present a

unique set of circumstances," says Jim Sergerstrom, a Rescue 3 instructor and one of its founders. "Still, there is a basic set of skills which can be learned, practiced and applied."

These basic skills, taught in the Swiftwater Rescue I course, include such things as shallow-water crossings and the use of throwbags, skills that appear far easier than they actually are in practice. Also included is an introduction to more technical skills, like the use of mechanical advantage to free a boat wrapped on a rock in mid-stream and boat-tethering techniques for securing stranded victims.

Sergerstrom stresses that a good deal of the exercises are just applying that old standby, common sense. But playing them out in mock disaster situations helps hone them to readily available skills. While many of the techniques, such as throwbags and water crossings, look easy, successfully completing the maneuver under the stress of a real emergency situation can be surprisingly difficult unless that skill has been practiced.

The benefits of such training and practice are drawing attention from many commercial guide organizations as well as state river-managing agencies. The state of California, with its many swift and rocky rivers, currently makes swiftwater rescue training a mandatory requirement for its commercial guides. Other states, including Utah and Maine, are considering proposals to make the training part of their guide-licensing programs. And several states have sent officials to participate in the course, both for training and as a means of evaluation. To date, Rescue 3 alone has certified over 5,600 individuals, including personnel from 450 different rescue agencies in three countries. "Yet," says Sergerstrom, "the work has just begun." — Jeff Rennie

*For more information on courses offered in your area or on organizing your own course, write: Rescue 3, P.O. Box 4686, Sonoma, CA 95370, or call (209) 532-7915.*