

COOPERSTOWN/CLINTON CANOE RACE, MEMORIAL DAY 2013.

By Herb Howe

[Doug Brooks additions in red . . .]

This was my 25th Cooperstown 70 miler on the Susquehanna river; I had started this in the mid-1970s at the suggestion of my sister and brother-in-law. Doug Brooks, a local friend who has paddled relay legs (@ 5miles each) was my bowman. [This was my first 70 miler . . .] Our canoe was a fast and tippy 18.6 ft Dillard racing canoe. The river was high and very fast. The night-time temperatures for the previous several days had dipped to the low 20s and water temperature was perhaps in the high-50s/low 60s.

At 6am, our line of about 35 canoes sprang from Cooperstown's shoreline. First goal: sprint around a boat about a mile away before turning downriver. Disaster quickly struck: 35 testosterone-fueled boats can create "chop," (water turbulence; ergo, tippiness) and an aluminum canoe slammed us, capsizing us. [I was about a dozen strokes into the race and simply heard a *kabong* followed by a rotating horizon and then cold water. A real WTF moment . . .] A police boat hauled us out and returned us to shore, where these two shivering canoers recommenced paddling [fortunately we had brought wool hats and socks which kept some warmth despite being soaked – but we were hurting and dismayed at the early dunking]. Already we were about thirty minutes behind.

[Actually, it was a sheriff's boat. We later saw one of the same deputies on a boat on Goodyear lake, where he commented that we looked dryer than before . . .]

We needed warm clothing and we saw our "pit-crew" (support team [Mike Halpin and Jay Gopal]) about five miles downriver waving to us. But laterally pulling ashore in fast water is difficult and we again tipped. We put on dry shirts and started again [Herb had also had the foresight to provide the pit crew with a thermos for hot chocolate which was exceptionally welcome].

In the "swamp," a serpentine area, we needed a sharp right-turn to avoid a log; we mostly made it but a glancing blow destabilized us before we could set against another log. Over again. [I really think our efficiency was hamstrung by the fact that we were chilled to the bone – we didn't react well in steering or in balance, worse, the second wave of semi-pro racing canoes that had started after us had caught up and were narrowing the maneuver options. However, as the day warmed, we did improve. Herb actually became stronger and stronger as the day went on.]

The now-present sun and our own exertion began warming us and we began overtaking some laggard canoers [in the course of the race I think we passed some of the same people 4-5 times!]. Our second portage (Goodyear dam) proved non eventful and we soon reached our final portage (Oneonta dam), some 30 miles into the race. We navigated the downriver put-back into the river (the water cascading over the dam had a dam-

wide hydraulic, so some care was needed) [Herb's especially good at plotting rapids – we never had a problem with the actual white water in this race or any others]. About two miles down we almost made it through a series of waves when we tipped again [This was near the end of the first leg of the relay race – Jay and I had made it through the previous day in a much more stable aluminum canoe during the first leg of the relay race].

Suddenly a barely-clad middle-aged bearded man started swimming to us! The three of us reached shore about a half-mile from the tip. “Joe” was a strange guy, but we appreciated his assistance. The tippings had washed away some of our PowerAid, but our intrepid pit-crew (Jay and Mike) resupplied us at the few reachable locations.

“Green Acres,” [infinitely more hazardous than the overhyped Unadilla Dam . . .] is a branching in the river about sixty miles downriver; in high water you can potentially save a few minutes by paddling the right fork. But we had gotten bad advice [by ‘we’ Herb means me – a couple of folks had mentioned the day before that Green Acres was passable to the right due to high water . . . well, almost] , as we should have realized when we saw several damaged and abandoned canoes [seriously, the right side passage at Green Acres is the Bermuda Triangle of the Susquehanna – aluminum and Kevlar canoes buried in debris and bits of shattered boats and life vests stuck in trees and rocks. The passages are narrow and choked with logs and roots . . .]. We reached an impassable point, blocked by the remains of an expensive [\$3,000?] racing

canoe damming the stream [we didn't see what the blockage was exactly until we eventually portaged to the other side – but at that point the channel was maybe 4' wide, the C1 canoe was wedged in between a large tree stump and rocks, with water tumbling down 2' over the top – in retrospect our canoe came close to joining the C1's fate if Herb hadn't called for an abort at the last moment . . .]. We backpaddled and tried ferrying over the shore. We almost made it—good, but no cigar. We tipped for the fifth time (we did warn several kayakers behind us and helped them to shore). [note to self: always go LEFT at Green Acres . . .]

We reached the Bainbridge finish line about eleven hours after the race began, ate, and then arrived back in DC at 1 am [Herb was in remarkably good shape and spirits despite a somewhat tempestuous odyssey, as I said he seemed to get stronger and stronger as the day wore on – and not having to follow the ambulance (Herbulance?) was a nice change to the end of the 70 miler! No doubt he'll remember his 25th run as much as I'll remember my first].