

Paddling from Yonkers to the 79th St. Boat Basin

The text for this story was incomplete due to a production error in the July/August issue. We're including the full story here.

by **Ralph J. Ferrusi**

On Friday, July 30, 2004, At 2:16 PM, Kath and I and our long-time "canoe buddy" Tim Lewis paddled our canoes—ours a pretty much brand-new dark green 17-foot We No Nah Sundowner, his a red 16-foot Old Town Penobscot—right up to the main dock of Manhattan's 79th Street Boat Basin, and tied up like we owned the place.

When Kath and I stepped out onto the dock we'd finished canoeing the entire Hudson River (having been inspired by Peter Lourie's River of Mountains: A Canoe Journey down the Hudson) from the Indian River white-water rafting put-in in the Adirondacks to Manhattan (except for about a six-mile stretch in the 'Daks from the hamlet of Riparius to "The Glen") over a period of several years, pretty much on day trips. The whole trip was done in open canoes, except for two sections in the Adirondacks that are un-canoeable and had to be rafted: the notorious Hudson River Gorge, and the nasty stretch from The Glen to North Creek. Let's go back and recreate this long, amazin' journey/adventure, starting from the north:

I honestly don't recall much about our 17-mile rafting trip through the Gorge: not being "uppity", but having rafted the Grand Canyon and the Urabamba in Peru, we were pretty experienced rafters (note that Lourie says there are two drops in this part of the Hudson of 80 feet per mile, whereas the Class V whitewater in the Grand Canyon drops "only" 20 to 30 feet per mile: hmmm, so much for my memory of this trip!!!). I do recall our guide was an "old timer": our Grand Canyon and Urabamba guides were pretty much—both male and female—young "hot shots". He did spin us around in one of the particularly nasty drops and we ran it backwards: wowzer! And, once below the Gorge, the long stretch down to North River was pretty tame.

We'd raced the venerable 8-mile Hudson River Whitewater Derby from North Creek to Riparius for many years, and had many trophies to show for it. At low water, it could be a "bone yard", and at high water something else! During our long white-water racing "career", we made it a point to scout as many of the rapids we ran as we could. The upper Hudson race is through wilderness, and none of the many big rapids could be scouted.

One of the "un-scoutables" was "Elephant Rock", and locals said you could safely sneak by it on the right at medium water levels, but definitely NOT at high levels. One year the river was high, and we gingerly approached it on the left. Getting close, I knew we were doomed, and we rode up an enormous wave, just like the Andrea Gail in "The Perfect Storm", and when near-vertical, flipped over backwards. We were swept about a half mile downstream before we could get the boat to shore and empty it out.

And, Spruce Rapids are just before the finish line in Riparius. Looking upriver from the Route 8 bridge, these wide, half-mile long rapids look like easy-peasy Class I ripples. But on the water they are very very technical, and demand a high level of concentration and skill. We pretty much always entered them mid-river, and "read-'em-and-ran-'em", with a lot of "Battle Stations" clanging and banging.

One year, pre-race, we walked three-quarters of the way up the east side of the river from the bridge, and were surprised that it looked very runnable. In the race, about a quarter of the way down—in the stretch we did not scout—a ledge that appeared to be about 10 feet high appeared right in front of us, and was impossible to avoid. We tumbled over it, and had to fight our way to shore. We were really shaken up, and it took a while to get our wits together and get through the rest of the rapid. And, because of this incident, we never ran the Upper Hudson again.

We've never paddled the next section from Riparius to The Glen. Friends had done it, and said there were a lot of rapids. If they were like Spruce, I wanted no part of them...We had checked out the first part of the river below the Glen from the road, and decided to raft it rather than canoe it. I'm very glad we did, as the first

rapid was a vicious corkscrew, that would have doomed us in a canoe.

The next Big Deal in the river is Rockwell Falls, in Lake Luzerne where the Sacandaga River joins the Hudson. We'd taken out above it after we canoed down from Warrensburg, then on our next trip put in below it, heading for the "dam-dest" stretch of the Hudson: SEVEN major dams down to Fort Edward and the Champlain Canal Lock 7 (River Once-Wild, Not Your Father's Hudson, Boating on the Hudson and Beyond, October 2008).

We eventually followed the Canal/Hudson down to the big Federal Dam in Albany. Peter Lourie points out that the Hudson drops an astounding 4000 feet from Lake Tear of the Clouds in the Adirondacks to here, then "a mere foot in the 150 miles from Albany to the Atlantic Ocean"!!!

We "river-town" hopped from Albany south, always taking the tides and the wind into consideration: ideally with the current, tide, and wind in our favor (but not always...). It was complicated: sometimes we took two cars, sometimes relied on the kindness of relatives and friends to shuttle us. Here's a list of the "River Towns" we put in/took out from Albany to Yonkers (since we live on the east side of the Hudson, we favored it): Schodack Island State Park, Coxsackie, Hudson, Catskill, Saugerties, Kingston, Norrie Point, Poughkeepsie, Chelsea/New Hamburg, Cold Spring/Garrison, Peekskill, Buchanan (Lent's Cove)/Verplanck, Croton/Ossining, and Tarrytown. Whadda journey!!!

OK, lets go back to 9:30 AM, Yonkers, July 2004: I don't recall how we found the boat launch in Yonkers (except that we must have canoed down to it from Tarrytown(???)), but my recollection is the big parking lot was empty and very run-down and decrepit.

I also don't recall much about the Yonkers waterfront, but recall it was a fine Summer's day, and the river was wonderfully smooth and calm. For this reason, Tim and I took off our PFD's (Personal Floatation Devices, aka "Life Jackets"). Looking back, I find this astonishing: nowadays we never set out without PFD's, even on White Pond when it is totally windless and placid, and especially on the Hudson. Live And Learn...

We were concerned about the currents near Spuyten Duyvil, where the East River joins the Hudson, but they were not a problem at the time of day we paddled past. The next Impossible to Ignore landmark was the George Washington Bridge, and it was a huge milestone for Kath and I on our long, long journey from the Adirondacks. We pulled in at a small Hudson River beach just below the bridge, and took a break at an idyllically-located picnic bench.

Then it was down along Manhattan (!!!), and the walkers and cyclists enjoying Riverside Park along the Henry Hudson Parkway. Next landmark/photo op was Grant's Tomb, and before we knew it there was the 79th Street Boat Basin, and, moored outside the Basin—because it wouldn't fit inside—was, yikes, the 370-foot Le Grand Bleu, Russian mega-billionaire Evgeny Markovich Schvidler's "Look At Me Toy".

Our canoes did fit inside the Basin, and we paddled up to the main dock as if we owned the place... OK, we had to get back to the Subaru. Kath and Tim lounged at the Basin, watching crew members from Le Grande being shuttled back and forth to shop in Manhattan (and the Clearwater cruise by), and I went out to the streets and hailed a cab to Grand Central, just like I knew what I was doing. The cabbie asked what my story was, and when I told him he said "I knew you were a bit different."

I fairly easily found a train to Yonkers, and worked out a taxi (a BIG old Ford (I think???) station wagon, driven by a big, friendly black woman. She brought me right to the Subaru (I had hoped it would be stolen: the 1998 standard shift Legacy wagon was, for whatever reasons, not a favorite of mine) and I scootched down to the Boat Basin, pulled in, and parked alongside signs that said PARKING FOR BOAT OWNERS ONLY. I was a boat owner...

What a day, what an adventure. An aside: that six-mile stretch from Riparius to The Glen is still hanging over us: maybe this year...