

THE HISTORY OF THE CHICAGO WHITEWATER ASSOCIATION

by Erik Sprenne (from April, 1989 *Gradient*)

The Chicago Whitewater Association (CWA) was incorporated in April of 1972. However, the beginnings of the club can be traced back to the mid-Sixties. It was then that the first decked boats appeared in the Midwest after being introduced on the East Coast somewhere around 1960. One of the first decked boats in the Chicago area (a Klepper Tramp) belonged to Will Provine, then a grad student at the University of Chicago.

Until decked boats appeared, there were several groups that did paddle open boats on whitewater rivers: The U of C Outing Club, the Hoofers Outing Club in Madison, the Minnesota Canoe Association, and the American Youth Hostels. After Will got his decked boat and more people became interested in decked boating, the University of Chicago Whitewater Club was formed largely for the purpose of getting pool time for rolling sessions. Will had taught himself to roll his decked boat, and managed to arrange the pool session at Boucher Hall through his athletic department contacts so that he could share his knowledge with other people.

Interest in decked boats grew, and as more people got involved, it became increasingly difficult to sneak people into the pool at Boucher Hall, as only university students were supposed to be in the pool. It was at this time that the decision was made to form the CWA. The group that formed the CWA did not want a club that had many rules and regulations, like the AYH that a number of the people had come from. Instead, the idea was for CWA to "provide educational information and training services to increase the safety, enjoyment, and skills of those paddling on whitewater rivers". (quote taken from the purpose statement in CWA Constitution). To this end, a constitution was drawn up that was modeled after the constitution of the Windy City Grotto, the Chicago caving club. What was envisioned, and has indeed persisted since the club's inception, was an organization consisting of volunteer positions. The original officers of the club were: President - Bruce Weber, Vice President - Bruce Campbell, Treasurer - Carolyn Leja, and Secretary/Editor - John Jonker.

One of the main factors limiting the growth of the club in the early years was the availability of boats. There were no plastic boats then, and there were only a very few people in the entire country building boats on a commercial basis. What this meant for an aspiring kayaker was that one had to talk a boat owner into teaching them the basics, or find someone who had an extra boat. With circumstances such as these, it is of no surprise that one of the major club activities was building boats. Club members soon found that building their own boats was not only a cheaper way to go, but often resulted in being the owners of lighter and more durable boats than could be obtained commercially.

In fact, boat building was such a new activity that there was much room for innovation. At first, boats were typically built using polyester resin and glass cloth, but through experimentation, construction methods improved. Techniques such as the use of nylon and polypropylene cloths, and the use of epoxy resins were pioneered in the Midwest by CWA, the Hoofers in Madison, and the Minnesota Canoe Association. There was a great deal of sharing of information on methods and materials between these clubs. CWA's John Jonker spent many hours at Crerar, a scientific library, researching aerospace engineering journals, and was the first to adapt the technique of vacuum bagging to boat construction. Bruce Weber, a consummate tinkerer, did much experimentation with boat building, and over the years built somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 boats. The efforts of all of these early boat builders did much to advance the art and science of boat construction.

The idea of a club newsletter was central to the purpose of forming the CWA, so that the club members would be informed of all of the happenings in the world of whitewater. The first issue of *The Gradient*, so named and edited by John Jonker was published in the Fall of 1972, and consisted of 2 pages. Over the years, *The Gradient* has grown to 10 pages of reduced type, and has been a forum for tips, techniques, educational articles, trip reports, advertisements, and humor relating to whitewater sport. The familiar CWA logo was first used on the January 1976 issue, and was designed by Terry Traxler. It is supposed to represent an upside-down kayak floating through the waves which form the letters "CWA", although it was not meant to be an indictment of the paddling abilities of the CWA members.

Paddling instruction has been a part of CWA history since the earliest days, and the use of wintertime pool sessions has been a major part of the club instructional program. The way it works is this: an interested member contacts a likely organization (YMCA, YWCA, Park District, or high school) and offers to teach a class for that organization to advertise. CWA members provide the know-how and equipment, and in exchange get free pool time after the class for the instructors to practice and maintain some semblance of "boat-feel" during the winter months. This program has been so successful that most CWA members probably learned to paddle at one of these sessions. Over the years these pool sessions have been offered in 19 different locations throughout the Chicago area, with as many as 10 different locations offering pool sessions at once.

The longest standing of these locations is at the Oak Park YMCA, which has been sponsoring pool sessions since 1971. Pool sessions have also been held at the Circle Campus pool, although not always with formal instruction, since 1972.

Moving water instruction has been a complementary and ongoing part of the winter pool sessions, using such rivers as the DuPage and the Vermilion locally, and the Wolf, Pike, and Red rivers in northern Wisconsin. The club-sponsored trips have evolved over the years into the sequence of DuPage, Vermilion, and Wisconsin rivers in order to provide the beginners with increasing levels of difficulty.

Since 1986, CWA has purchased insurance for these trips through the ACA so that the club instructors and officers would be protected from financial ruin in the case of an injury and lawsuit. Fortunately, such a scenario has not yet taken place. The changes in the ACA insurance program for 1989 prompted the club to hold two instructor certification clinics in 1988, and as a result there are now 24 ACA certified instructors among the club's 350 members.

Racing has also played an important part in CWA history. Pool slaloms have been offered in many locations in the winter months to let the beginning paddlers get a taste of what slalom racing is about in addition to providing gate practice for the more serious racers. In the outdoor arena, CWA has sponsored some type of whitewater race since 1973. Until 1980, the club sponsored a wildwater race on the Peshtigo River, and since 1981, CWA has sponsored the Spring Wolf Slalom.

The wildwater race (which several times was the Midwest Division's championship race) was sponsored in the early years because it didn't require as much time, expertise, and equipment that was required to run a slalom race. In addition, the Hoofers had been sponsoring a spring slalom on the Wolf since 1964, so there was no need for the duplication of efforts. In the early 70's, CWA members helped the Hoofers run the race by designing the course and hanging the gates. As an interesting aside, the first Wolf Slalom in 1964 (although there was also a downriver race associated with the event) was cosponsored by the Hoofers and Trout Unlimited, a fishing organization, as a means of drawing attention to the recreational assets of the Wolf in response to the threat of a dam being proposed for the upper river.

When the sponsorship of the spring Wolf slalom fell apart in 1980, and there was no race, CWA decided to take over the sponsorship of the race. This was done because there were more club members interested in slalom than in wildwater, and the Wolf Slalom has since become a CWA tradition.

Attempts have also been made over the years to hold slaloms (or at least hang gates) in other locations. One year, an "unofficial" slalom was held at Horserace Rapid on the Peshtigo, and in 1975 there was an attempt to hold a slalom at Wildcat Rapid on the Vermilion. This race was doomed by the fact that an

errant canoe snagged a line and pulled the gate-hanging wire to the river bottom after only 3 gates had been hung.

In the early years of the club's existence, there was a group of people who were avid racers, simply for the reason that racing was a good way to improve one's skills. Bruce Campbell, Bruce Weber, and a group of the early members were all avid racers, driving to Petersburg and Ohio pyle in the East, and Buena Vista in the West to compete in some of the far away races. Many of this early group raced in national competitions simply as a skill building exercise. With the ever increasing popularity of racing, the nationals have become harder to enter, but CWA has still managed a respectable showing: we have a number of racers who are nationally ranked in the A and B divisions. Our most "famous" racer is Jim Tibensky, who has been the National Senior Slalom Champion for the last 3 years, as well as the Midwest Division Champion in both Slalom (last 4 years) and Wildwater (last 6 years).

In keeping with the founding group's idea of being a somewhat loosely knit organization, the CWA has never published extensive lists of organized trips. Although early issues of *The Gradient* published trip schedules, most of the listed trips were either races or training trips for novice paddlers. Instead, paddlers generally put together trips for the upcoming weekends sometime during the week. If a trip was particularly interesting or memorable it tended to become an annual event, and thereby "earned" its way into CWA tradition.

Some of these traditional trips are (or were): the "Paddle with the Crazies" trip, the President's Day Alabama trip, the "Experts or Fools Only Open Boat Sacrifice to the River Gods" trip, the multi-day self-contained trip, the Lake Michigan Surfing Outing, the "Patience and Endurance Test", the "Weird Food Frolics", and the "Weber Special".

The "Paddle with the Crazies" trip on January 1 has been an annual event since 1980. It provides opportunity to be the first one on the river in any given year, and is the only trip where paddling and XC skiing on the same day are the norm. The problem in some years has been finding a stretch of water somewhere that is not frozen.

The President's Day Alabama trip was also started in 1980 after some CWA members had met up with some Alabama paddlers at NOC in 1979 and were subsequently invited to sample some of the whitewater in the Yellowhammer state. This trip generally provides the first "real" river trip each year for many paddlers.

The "Experts or Fools Only . . ." trip was run several years in the first part of the decade. Apparently, all the open boaters in the club were either sacrificed, or have gone into hiding . . .

The multi-day self contained trips were started in 1975 by Ralph Schinke. Ralph is a person who had an aversion to running daily shuttles, and so would plan multi-day trips. Several of these trips were weekend trips in Wisconsin, but Ralph was most at home in the wilds of Canada.

The Lake Michigan Surfing Outing was started in 1979, and has been an annual event since then. Although the wind hasn't always cooperated, this outing has shown many CWA paddlers that interesting water can be found close to home when there is an on-shore wind. The 1982 trip gained some notoriety when paddlers surfing in a strong off-shore wind had to be rescued by police boats.

The "Patience and Endurance Test" had its beginnings in 1979 as a fall flat water trip to northern Wisconsin. Over the years it has evolved into a trip that features different rivers (and not necessarily flat water), and more importantly a different type of featured cuisine for a Saturday night potluck dinner.

The "Weird Food Frolics" isn't really a paddling trip at all, although stories, pictures, and movies are generally shared at this event, which was started in 1977 by Pat Mueller. This event is a potluck dinner party, but the requirement is that the dish brought must be the weirdest possible edible concoctions. featured delicacies have included lime pickles, avocado grapefruit soup, karabakh khorovats, beef tongue polonaise, and prickly pear punch to name but a few. A bottle of Alka-Seltzer was bought for the first of these class V dining experiences, and to the best of my knowledge has not been opened.

Food seems to be a recurring theme with the various CWA outings, and no listing of the same would be complete without one of our longest standing traditions, the "Weber Special". The first president of CWA, Bruce Weber, was (and still is, I presume) an accomplished chef who liked to prepare a real meal - steak, baked potatoes, soup, salad, and cocktails - at the river for the entire group during a fall color trip. When he moved to Oregon, the rest of the group decided to name the trip in his honor, and continue the fine tradition. The dinner became a group effort due to the popularity of the trip, with people preparing meal items. There was also an unspoken contest for a while to see if the food preparers could out-gourmet the previous year's trip. To this day, the Weber Special is one of CWA's more popular trips, with up to 80 or 90 people attending the dinner.

These trips are the more well known ones in CWA, but any weekend will find some CWA members on the water somewhere, in some corner of the world.

CWA members have sampled rivers in the Americas, Europe, Turkey, Nepal, China, New Zealand, and likely every place in between. Skill levels of our members range from those who are most happy paddling on the farm pond to those who paddle at the outer edge (and beyond) of sanity. Given the number of miles paddled by club members, we can be very thankful that none of our members have met their demise on the river, although there have been some close calls.

Happy Birthday CWA, in your seventeenth year! May you continue to prosper!

Erik Sprenne