

While The Spirit of America turns 30, Those Crazy Madhatters Do It Again!

Local Lore and Local History at its best

Those familiar with my local history entries over the past decade or so are aware of the many past events in county history presented. History is an umbrella term comprising past events as well as the memory, discovery, collections and interpretations of past events. Topics have included notable county citizens such as Vrooman, Casement, Howe, Turney, Morley, Coulby and Kaukonen. County hidden gems such as the St. Clair Bridge Fire, Willoughby Medical College, Liberty Hollow and Painesville Railroad Depot have been shared. Many of the topics span nearly two hundred years of our county's story. According to the ancient Greeks, history literally means investigation. This month I depart from the normal well documented aspects of



our county history and take a road less traveled. We will examine two more recent events in our local history and investigate the collective memory of the people who have experienced it.



Madhatters Canoe and Kayak Race

Since 1965, people from all over Northeastern Ohio and points far beyond have come together for one goal: to canoe an 8.5 mile section of the Grand River from the **Harpersfield Dam** in Ashtabula to **Hidden Valley** in Madison. Quite sane, well-adjusted citizens for 364 days each year can take part in this one day / morning totally insane venture. A river in flood or thrashing along in white water is something to challenge. 2024 alone saw 350 register for the paddle. This spring river race lets competitors use their heads. A 2007 quote by Austinburg participant Jamey Daugherty summarizes the fun trip perfectly, “ The race is not always won by the swift. Sometimes it’s won by the person wearing the silliest hat.” Last weekend added the next chapter to Ohio river racing. The race day weather saw chilly, 45 degree conditions, some fast eddies, maybe 50 degree water temperatures and water heights topping five feet. Happy to say that





all who participated finished safely thanks to Lake Metroparks staff, volunteers, spotters and local river safety and rescue personnel. As in the past, rain, cold and yes even snow and ice have never been strong deterrents.

Some Madhatter Factoids:

- The started and for many years was held in the month of March. In 1984 the Grand River **Madhatters Race** was frozen on race day. Many March race events were pushed back in the first decade to combat the weather anomalies: ice, hail or snow.
- A *Star Beacon* newspaper article made mention of a local Madhatter Race in 1964.
- The **Keelhaulers Canoe Club** founded in 1966-67 comprised of nearly 300 families from across 20 states joined with the local **Madhatters Club** to make this annual amateur paddling event tradition.
- Early Madhatter patches were distributed to participants and are collectables today. The 2024 best hat winner wore a Madhatter lid featuring all known patches. See photo provided.
- In 1979 it was announced that 665 entrants in 13 classes participated in the race.
- That same year an announced crowd of 1500 onlookers took in the event. Unreliable stats claimed 6700 participants and over 3500 craft had entered the official race ledger since 1965.
- **Pete Burkholder**, circa 1969, **John Fulmer** circa early 1970s, 1979 and **Joe Haus** were key event planners and club presidents.
- Notable past winners include **George and Dave Csepegi**, **Dana Daughters**, **E. Leszek and Fulmer** among many others.
- **Harry Geizer** was given one of the first awards for the maddest hat worn by a contestant even gracing the cover of a local newspaper.
- Another memorable hat appeared and garnered media mention in 2007. **Justin Daugherty's** Fire Pit Hat took first place. That same year the biggest winner may have



been **Brian Soppi** who upon completion of the race proposed to Kristen Miller, his sweetheart.

- Canoes were the norm for the first decades of the race as kayaks began to appear in 1990 and became the norm by the early 00s.



- Lake Metroparks assumed the mantle of race organizers by the late 80s. **Brian Davidson**, LMP Outdoor Education manager has coordinated the majority of the races since then.
- One of the fastest recorded winning times for the 8.5-mile course was 1:00.52 by F. Weber in 2004. The C-2 cruiser tandem of Masters and Bellas timed 50:47 in 1996. Average times push past 2:00.00 hours with some times pushing past the 3:30.00 mark.

Hopefully this totally incomplete and irreverent river race history provided a small dose of local lore and might encourage your participation in future race history. Additional stories, artifacts, early photos or newspaper

clippings are welcomed and can be sent to my attention at **Lake Metroparks, Environmental Learning Center**.

The Spirit of America (SOA) Turns 30!

Spirit of America, a Lake County home grown educational program utilizing our greatest natural resource, Lake Erie and the fresh waters flowing into her was established in 1995. Created and founded by **Harry Allen Jr**, then owner and President of Great Lakes Power Products in Mentor, Ohio, the foundation took its name from the namesake endurance race





boat. Dedicated and focused on providing children a standardized educational boating-based curriculum in a non-traditional classroom, outdoors and on-the-water, the Spirit of America has become a premier youth boating program reaching to date tens of thousands of students from all backgrounds and abilities.

With the funding assistance of partners from State Watercraft agencies, the United States Coast Guard administered Sport Fish

Restoration and Boating Trust Fund as well as independent funding, this water based educational / recreational program now can be found in 18 locations across several states. Enrolled students are immersed in a curriculum meeting all the international knowledge based and hands-on, skills-based standards of education as well as approved national education benchmarks, including physical education, science, vocational, STEM and STEAM. This unique student curriculum touches upon all aspects of drowning prevention and equipment awareness, and incorporates hands-on experience in sail, paddle and powered watercraft.

Thirty years later, offering a unique, safe and comprehensive water-based educational and recreational program, the Spirit of America program instills confidence and fosters the spirit of teamwork in today's



youth. The underlying program goals also include developing self-esteem, nurturing responsible behavior and promoting positive, lifelong ambitions.

SOA provides communities across many states with a sustainable resource of nationally recognized educational programming and lifelong recreational opportunities. Quite simply, SOA graduates join those who came before them inspiring a lifelong stewardship of



our natural resources and a viable vocational marine / maritime workforce.

Spirit of America is dedicated to its tagline “No Child Left on the Dock.”

Visit SpiritofAmerica95.org to learn more about the opportunities for safer-smarter youth boating or to volunteer / assist in the foundation mission.

Source- Madhatters - *Madison Press* March 29, 1977, April 28, 1977, March 22,1979 editions
Painesville Telegraph, March 29, 1969, March 22,1975 editions
News-Herald, March 25, 1974, March 26,1979, April 29,2007 editions
Lake Metroparks archives, race results

Spirit of America - Director Cecelia Duer

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