

The Return of River Rowing

by Peter Klose

To the uninitiated, the early morning stillness of the water is a distant, disconnected part of life in our river towns—just scenery making the Hudson River Valley a valley. To the initiated, some might say obsessed, the early morning stillness of the great gray river is the bridge connecting our past to our rowing community, and to our future of healthy living.

Before the sun rises, and the wind blows, the Hudson is a quiet, inviting place offering rowers of all types a chance to connect to the river, to hear the sound of oars pulling through the water under human, non-motorized power; to escape the often overscheduled life we lead. Until one has experienced the sound and rhythmic swoosh of a rowing shell slip through the water, the surge of power from fellow oarsmen and tasted the slightly salty brine from the river (or your perspiration), one has not been initiated into the cult of the early morning rower.

These early morning celebrations of water, oars and sweat are becoming increasingly frequent all along the Hudson River as rowing has returned as a popular sport in the Hudson Valley. High school, college, adaptive rowers, junior or master rowers (age 18 or under or 27 or older, respectively) can be seen rowing from public parking lots, informal boat houses and grand newly constructed community boat houses from Nyack to Albany. The Poughkeepsie-centered Hudson River Rowing Association (www.hudsonriverrowing.org) declares that its “philosophy” is that rowing is a “life

sport,” meaning that you can enjoy it for life. To support that philosophy, in 2006 the Association spearheaded and coordinated the construction and fundraising required to build the Hudson River Rowing Boathouse, which stores over a hundred rowing shells and supports the equipment for nine Hudson Valley rowing clubs, and trains over 600 athletes each year, including high school teams from Rhinebeck to Arlington. Across the river-on the Rondout Creek in Kingston, the Rondout Rowing Club (www.rondoutrowingclub.org), formed in 1999, now has approximately 40 or 50 members, including rowers of all ages (13 to 70+) and abilities. Their facilities support the Kingston High School Crew Club.

What’s behind this fitness craze? Many dedicated volunteers, donors, and athletes, and a pretty spectacular past. The revival of rowing is only appropriate for the mid-Hudson Valley where, from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth-century, hundreds of college-aged boys vied for sporting immortality and nearly a million spectators poured into Poughkeepsie (some over the soon to be revitalized iron railroad bridge) to be a part of the Intercollegiate Rowing Association Regatta (IRA). The ghosts of old Regatta Row (boathouses of Cornell, Columbia, Penn and Navy), still haunt the river banks where the Hudson River Rowing Association has established its shiny new rowing community of colleges, clubs and individuals.

Revival of Poughkeepsie’s waterfront is only a part of the excitement surrounding this summer’s Quadricentennial Celebration. In honor of Henry Hudson’s 1609 trip up the Hudson, Marist and the Hudson River Rowing Association are planning to host a new “Poughkeepsie Regatta” under the newly reconstructed pedestrian Railway Bridge

connecting Ulster and Dutchess County (the longest in the world). Last year, the HRRRA quietly pre-viewed a revitalized the regatta along the historic IRA racecourse starting roughly at the Culinary Institute of America and finishing in the shadow of the Railroad Bridge (2.3 miles).

The story of the Poughkeepsie Regatta begins with Harvard and Yale's long rowing rivalry. Inspired by their example, several other Ivy and non-Ivy League schools—Columbia, Penn, Cornell, Navy, and Syracuse among them—to hold their own competition. After investigation of other locales along the Hudson, Columbia University proposed Poughkeepsie as the site for the regatta and festivities. The Hudson near Poughkeepsie offered a wide stretch of river able to accommodate many lanes of shells, was deep enough to permit steam launches, and was protected enough to protect the crews from excessively windy conditions, while offering close proximity to view the sporting event from observation trains along the four-mile course. At the same time, the Railroad Bridge offered spectators easy access as a crossroads of rail transportation between New York, Boston, Hartford, and the South.

The Poughkeepsie Regatta was born in June of 1895, and was held every year thereafter until the last race in 1949 except for the war years 1899, 1917–1919, and 1942–1946. Conditions on the Hudson River were not always ideal. For example, there were reports that 1929 Regatta saw more than fifty percent of the crews' boats sunk by rough water. Finally, in 1950, for various reasons, including the difficult weather and tidal conditions of the Hudson, the Regatta moved to Marrietta Ohio, and then to Syracuse. Gone are the days that the IRA stays in one place. As rowing has nationalized

and increased in popularity, other universities have become major competitors to the traditionally strong East Coast rowing powerhouses, so the IRA moves from place to place.

In its day, the old IRA was one of the most storied and celebrated events of its time. According to the *New York Journal*, the banks of the Hudson River and the Railroad Bridge served as a back drop to the annual race in grand style: “one of the grandest of rivers deploying its fairest of reaches under a glorious blue cloud-flecked sky; its lofty banks lovely with foliage, crowded with stupendous masses of human beings fluttering with bright colors; and its bosom freighted with a thousand of the prettiest and most graceful pleasure boats ever designed, all bejeweled with tinted flags; and along its western shore a serpent half a mile in length, red, white and blue, with a head of steam at each end of it, gliding swiftly up and down; and shoutings, steam screamings, and cannon firings . . .”

The “serpent” referred to in this depiction of the crowd was a spectator train operated by the New York Central Railroad that followed the entire four mile race. One famous Cornell oarsman from the 1897 championship crew, Mark Odell, described the tumultuous Poughkeepsie race atmosphere this way: “The only sounds I realized for three miles were the words of our coxswain and the hoarse cheer of exultation from the train when we began to lead. The other yells I did not hear or did not notice, although the din I know was terrific and constant. The last mile was along a flotilla of yachts, which kept up the most infernal pandemonium you can imagine. Not a word could we hear of our coxswain's orders. Cannons were going off right above our heads, which made it feel as

though the top of the skull was coming off at each shot.”

It’s been nearly sixty years since the last Regatta in Poughkeepsie, but all is not forgotten. Picture the possibility that navy frigates may soon line the shores of the Hudson Highlands as Navy competes against the Ivy League schools at the newly revamped Poughkeepsie Regatta (honored as a Quadricentennial Regatta by Marist). According to a sports information officer from Marist University, Marist has firm commitments from many of the old crews (including Columbia, Penn, Cornell, Syracuse and Cal) to celebrate the past on Saturday, October 3, 2009.

[Separate Box:]

For those interested in learning more, reading more, or seeing wonderful photographs of history nearly forgotten, the Marist College Library has a fabulous on-line tribute to the history of the Poughkeepsie Regatta <http://library.marist.edu/archives/regatta/about.html> .

Peter Klose, Esq., was raised in Red Hook and maintains a law office there, he rowed at Cornell University and for a summer with Vassar, and has re-kindled his interest in rowing and historic preservation through his association with the River Rowing Association (www.riverrowing.org) based in Nyack.