

# CONNECTICUT RIVER CHALLENGE

2001

The Connecticut River Challenge (CRC), brainchild of Chris Gasbarro and Howard Asher in the spring of 1997, was originally a quest to reach Long Island Sound by paddling a canoe down the Connecticut River, from the Canadian border, during April's long Patriot's Day weekend. The original crew consisted of one canoe, one support vehicle, and 6 people, who, two at a time, took turns paddling 6-hour shifts downstream, day and night, in severe flood conditions. It was a race against time, and the 6 pioneers of this event made the 368-mile trek in under 70 hours, a feat that has yet to be equaled by subsequent CRC's, three more of which have now come to fruition. I take this opportunity also to recognize Amy D'Agostino as the only individual who has paddled in all four Challenges, and to thank her for her help and experience in making this a successful event year after year.

What follows now is my account of CRC 2001, completed by the 15 individuals listed at the end of this article. 5 of us were veterans of previous Challenges, and all of us have made new friends through the hardships we endured together.

Our trip began from the UMASS Kanoe locker at 6:00pm, Friday April 13, 2001. After a brief stop for pizza in Woodsville, NH, we continued north toward the Canadian border, where we would put in just below the Canaan Dam in West Stewartstown, NH. Three boats launched at 1:30 Saturday morning into a swift current and were quickly swallowed up by the icy darkness. Several hours later, after meandering through snowfall and subfreezing temperatures, and running the breached dam at Lyman Falls, our paddlers pulled over at Bloomfield, VT for a well-deserved rest.

Having just been through an unusually cold winter, the next 3 sections of the river were plagued with ice hazards, and the 60-mile portage that we were forced into brought us to a put-in below the Comerford Dam. From here, the water was fun and fast, and the three boats were soon portaging the dams at McIndoe Falls and East Ryegate. Their next challenge was to negotiate the narrows at Woodsville and the confluence of the Ammonoosuc River. Although they got through this Class 2 whitewater with no mishap, one boat got caught in a stubborn circular eddy for several minutes before managing to break free. Below this, a few wide meanders brought us to the crew change at Newbury, VT.

From here we paddled with only two canoes for the next 3 shifts. Darkness fell halfway to the next crew change at Orford, NH, giving way to daylight only a short while before the boats arrived at the Wilder Dam in Lebanon, NH. On the way, paddlers discovered an ice blockage along one side of an island in Hanover that they eventually passed. Meanwhile, the vans were having adventures of their own. The Rent-a-Wreck collided with a deer while driving along the riverbank scouting for the canoes! No damage to either party except for a few deer hairs caught in the signal lights. As the deer ran off into the woods, the local cop that had been following us decided to flip his lights on and interrogate us. As soon as he realized that we were an insane bunch of college students, rather than the beer-bellied deer poachers that he usually deals with, he drove off in search of something more lucrative. Finally, while waiting at the Dartmouth Boathouse checkpoint, campus security came around to chase the vans off the premises. I think this was a night that everyone could have done without.

With a fresh crew taking over below the Wilder Dam, the canoes pulled over to portage around Sumner Falls and then sped on toward Ascutney, VT and a crew change at Wilgus State Park. Here, the third canoe was returned to the river. The water was as high and fast this weekend as I'd ever seen it, and this made for some very quick paddling as well as numerous opportunities to slack off for extended periods to tell Minute Mysteries! 3 miles after portaging around Bellows Falls, a new crew took over in Walpole, NH, and the paddlers were soon investigating the site of the train wreck that had occurred 6 days earlier in Westminster, VT. The air was heavy with the smell of spilled fuel, and a couple of the train cars that had been plucked from the river were still awaiting removal from the scene. Darkness descended once again, as the canoes passed Putney, VT, and soon the lights of Brattleboro were visible behind the hills.

The Brattleboro crew change was routine, and the third boat was again taken off the water here. But then, just when everything was running smoothly, Erik lost the key to his van. After an exhaustive key hunt, we decided that everyone could use some sleep, and that looking for the key in the daylight would be more productive. The canoes were pulled up by the Vernon Dam and people tried to crash for a while. Fortunately, the key was soon found, where someone was changing clothes, thus obviating the need for a full-body-cavity search!

Under the early light of day on Monday morning, two canoes were launched again, this time into the wild waters below the Vernon Dam. They were soon drifting quietly down the river across the state line into Massachusetts. This shift also got to paddle through some Class 2 whitewater as the boats passed through French King Gorge and the Millers River confluence, on the way to the portage take-out at Barton Cove in Gill, MA. After bringing the canoes around Turners Falls, the ninth and final shift began their home-stretch journey to the Northampton boat house. Seven others of us, who were not paddling, succumbed to our hunger pangs and the temptation for some real hot food, so the Whately Diner was soon graced by our presence!

In the mid-afternoon of Monday, April 16, two canoes that had, only 62 hours earlier, been a mile from Canada, pulled up alongside the docks of the UMASS boat house in Northampton. There was much rejoicing, and much haste made, to get our equipment back to the locker, so that we could all begin the long process of cleaning up. And then, in an unprecedented display of team unity, and in recognition of our accomplishment, ALL 15 of us delayed showers and neglected school work just a little longer to go out for dinner at Chili's in celebration of the 215 miles we had just paddled.

- Erik Hjerpe, April 2001

### **PADDLERS:**

- |                       |                      |                    |
|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Dana Collins       | 6. Gary Flynn        | 11. Erik Hjerpe ** |
| 2. Kati Collins       | 7. Matt Frain *      | 12. James Lasher   |
| 3. Amy D'Agostino *** | 8. David Gaylord     | 13. Kate Morkeski  |
| 4. Jackie Dauphinais  | 9. Rachel Gordon     | 14. Nathan Tobey * |
| 5. Karl Dietzler *    | 10. Christina Hedden | 15. Maria Wikström |

\* Veteran

# SHIFTS PADDLED, CRC 2001

	<b>BOAT I</b>	<b>BOAT II</b>	<b>BOAT III</b>
<b>CREW 1</b> (West Stewartstown)	Nathan Dana	Matt Maria	Karl Kate
<b>CREW 2</b> (Comerford)	Amy Gary	Jackie David	Erik Kati
<b>CREW 3</b> (Newbury)	James Rachel	Karl Christina	
<b>CREW 4</b> (Orford)	Nathan Maria	Kate Dana	
<b>CREW 5</b> (Lebanon)	Matt David	Erik Jackie	
<b>CREW 6</b> (Ascutney)	Amy Rachel	James Christina	Gary Maria
<b>CREW 7</b> (Walpole)	Nathan Kate	Karl Dana	Erik Kati
<b>CREW 8</b> (Brattleboro)	Jackie David	Matt/Erik James/Rachel	
<b>CREW 9</b> (Turners Falls)	Amy Christina	Gary Kati/James	