

## Journey Down the Hudson – September 2011 – Skip Doyle

*I witness the atrocity of September 11, 2001 from atop the bell tower of Riverside Church in Manhattan. As I see the remaining twin tower burn torch-like, I think of the brave souls rushing into the skyscraper as thousands of people are doing their best to pour out. Feeling voyeuristic, I gaze merely a sole minute, before I join the throngs in the streets evacuating the City of New York. Where to next? Up the Hudson River to Graymoor to overlook the city from that holy mount; over to West Point, the source of our Army's military might; and finally down to the River itself whose waters ever offer solace.*

Each September 11 since, I have taken the day off to be in some far-off place, not in fear or escape, but in remembrance and reverence. The first year, the deep, dark caverns of Cobleskill; the next year, the post-summer beaches of Fire Island; now a decade later, taking an entire week to kayak down the Hudson River from Albany to New York City to be on the very waters of the river itself on the anniversary of that fateful day.

### **Day 0: Saturday, September 10 – Albany**

In order to be on the river throughout the day on September 11, this was my travel day to reach Albany with my kayak – a 17 foot P&H Quest – atop my car, along with gear and food to begin at 4 p.m. Alas, with my boat at the bottom of the Albany boat ramp ready to go, I was dismayed to discover I had overlooked packing my lightweight paddle – Werner Shuna (210 cm, 27 oz., 46x18 cm high angle blade) . The choice: commence my journey with my heavy emergency paddle or return home to fetch the trekking paddle and return the next day. I chose the latter knowing it would cost me a day on the river and the realization that whatever trip I would have had starting on Saturday night, will now be a totally different set of circumstances and experiences as I begin the next day instead. Perhaps I was being saved from hardship or even death itself... perhaps it would be no better nor worse – simply different.



### **Day 1: Sunday, September 11 – Rensselaer to Castleton (10 miles)**

It was particularly convenient to park my car at the Rensselaer Amtrak train station. The car



would be safe, and since the train tracks course along the eastern shore of the Hudson River, it would be easy to dock my boat at any train station to retrieve my car.

With hurricane Irene having ravaged the northeast the week before, docks were destroyed, the river choked with debris, the shores mired with mud, and the bogs overrun with mosquitoes. My first challenge: launching my boat from this muck. To my rescue were a group of tattooed and pierced teenagers enjoying a Sunday afternoon in this little launch park. "Anyone here a photographer?" I asked. They all pointed to the budding photographer among them who then snapped my picture. "Might anyone help push me in?" A youngster named Tyler volunteered, rolled up his pants, removed his sneakers, and sank into the mud with me. As he straddle the kayak aft, one firm and smooth push from Tyler sent me on my journey.

From the start of my journey, I was amazed by the magnanimity – the great spirit! – of the people I encountered, as if angels appearing at the right moment seemingly ever asking "How can I be helpful?" Better though than angels heaven-sent, these were my new neighbors along the community of the Hudson River Valley.

It was 5 p.m. when I began my trek. A late hour, but ebb tide had begun and the south wind was mild, so that while the swells were substantial, at least the chop of the afternoon had ceased. Albany was majestic in this evening light. The tall piers, tugs, ships and barges along each shore were rather intimidating, for if I needed to get to shore, it would be impossible to find a place from which to exit my little kayak. The cluster of city buildings gave way to the Port of Albany, and then to the treed hills of the adjoining town, I felt myself becoming ever more comfortable as I settled into the kayak, into the river, and into the more natural setting of the surrounding hills.

At dusk, I made way for the park in the town of Bethlehem to camp for the night. Alas it was flooded, muddied, and so overrun by mosquitoes that despite donning my raingear as protection from them, in the brief minutes I scouted the park, I was bitten a half-dozen times on the ankles and as many times on my face.

Dark now at 8 p.m., I lit the kayak's two white blinking strobe lights, and paddled for the constellations of lights a mile across the river which I hoped would be a welcoming marina. Landing and finding no one, I then knocked on the dockmaster's door... no answer. So I set up my tent under the picnic pavilion for a fitful night's sleep as the pavilion was but 20 yards from the Amtrak rail tracks. Each hour, a thundering train would crescendo towards me, it's horn blaring its warning, and then in moments, the train would rush by creating such a wind that my tent would billow outwards from the inside out.

## Day 2: Monday, September 12 – Castleton to Catskill (25 miles)

Rising at 5 a.m. to the rushing rumble of a tugboat speeding down the dark river on the ebb tide, I exited my tent to a full moon setting in the west. After a bowl of cereal as I loaded my gear into the kayak, one club member was also getting an early start. "Anything I can help you with?" he asked. "Just making a few final gear adjustments." I answered. I was on the water by 6 a.m. to enjoy the morning mist and sunrise. The river – pond still – greeted me along with every manner of creatures: jumping fish, gliding eagles, deer drinking at the shore, and every sort of sea bird. (Ezekiel 47:1-9, "wherever the water goes it brings health, and life teems wherever the river flows.")



Under the Route 90 / Thruway bridge ahead, I heard the massive diesel engine of a tugboat with a cement barge leaving port down the river. I was grateful for those people willing to make a living in an environment of constant noise, and was grateful too, that unnatural intrusion would soon be out of sight and earshot to leave me in the peace of this quiet river and undeveloped shores.

My first stop of the day was Coeyman's Marina for a bathroom break. The greeters could easily have foisted me off to a port-a-potty in the park. Instead, they made the effort to lead me through the various marine buildings to the members' lounge where they entered the combination to the lock for this private facility giving me access and relief. Coxsackie, Athens, Hudson all looked like attractive villages from the river, though I did not go ashore to explore.

While I paddled down the channel, I think it would have been more scenic to scoot behind Rattlesnake and Coxsackie islands; approaching Hudson, I did stay out of the channel and instead paddled down the quiet, west side of the Middle Ground Flats. Despite having the invaluable *Hudson River Water Trail Guide* with me in the cockpit, often the water was too rough to cease paddling and consult it. While the tide had turned against me, I felt that was a minor factor compared to the south wind that had picked up, and thus the chop along with it.

Lunch I enjoyed on the Athens-Hudson lighthouse. What I found interesting is that as a humongous container ship passed, it left no wake, whereas a passing fishing vessel had the dock bobbing ferociously. From the lighthouse to the Rip Van Winkle bridge, I would have paddled the more quiet eastern side of Rogers

Island, but it was choked with water chestnuts which forced me into the channel and around the western side of the island. Waves were bouncy, but not so severe as to hinder me from photographing Olana in the soft evening light.

I entered Catskill Creek at 6 p.m. and docked at Riverview Marina where only one sailor was on the dock. "Where can I find the dockmaster?" I asked. "Mike's gone for the day," the sailor replied, "but just tie up over there." Which I did, and left the dockmaster a note stating the kayak would be there overnight. My early arrival gave me ample time for a real Italian dinner. And while the downtown B&B was closed, the proprietor graciously called a taxi (Decker Taxi – a mere \$6) and made a reservation for me at one of the Thruway hotels. Off to a shower, a real bed, a good night's sleep!

### **Day 3: Tuesday, September 13 – Catskill to Esopus (30 miles)**

Putting in at 7 a.m., I was greeted with a sunrise over Olana and calm waters coming out of the creek. The no man's land south of Catskill was remote, and the rising Catskill Mountains in the distance over which I have trekked many times made me feel at home. By mid-morning, a 25 mph wind from the south was breaking waves over my bow as my craft submerged into the white caps. In short, it was a difficult day throughout. Hugging the eastern shore seemed to lessen the effect of the wind and waves, though at times, the waves rebounding off the rocks seemed to compound the turbulence.



My sole respite was a 3x3 rock sheltered behind Magdalen Island off Tivoli. Standing upon it for lunch was brief since that tiny rock a few inches above the water surface was quickly submerged by the rising tide. Testimony to the strong south wind: the flag atop the Rhinecliff Bridge was sticking straight out as a board. Because of weather conditions, I was unable to cross to the Saugerties Lighthouse as I hoped, and at Rhinebeck, I considered either overnighing at the B&B or taking Amtrak back to my car in Rensselaer. My fateful decision: make a mad dash past green buoy 73 with waves breaking over my gunwales to my childhood home, Port Ewen. After a few harrowing minutes of concentrated paddling with breakers washing into my cockpit, I was in Port Ewen where I was welcomed to use the bathroom at the Hidden Harbor Boat Club, used a sponge to sop out the water in my boat, had a bite to eat on the dock, and then took to the seas again. Just south of the boat club, I coincidentally encountered Ed Weber, director of the Esopus Lighthouse

Commission with whom I have labored to restore the lighthouse – though while for him it is a daily labor of love, for me I can claim to have done little more than to have painted the cupola.

Finally taking out at Mount Saint Alphonsus in Esopus at 6 p.m., I enjoyed a shower, a bed, and a good night's sleep. This is the only day I had muscle fatigue with sore trapeziuses, and my shoulder joints felt achy enough that I consumed the one, sole aspirin of this trip.

#### **Day 4: Wednesday, September 14 – Esopus to Beacon (25 miles)**

In the morning, I shared Mass with the Redemptoristine nuns of Mount Saint Alphonsus. Afterwards, one of the sisters asked me, "What community do you belong to?" Thinking how this cloistered order misses out on seeing God face-to-face in creation, I answered, "The community without walls."

Attending Mass got me a late start of 11 a.m., so I paddled past Esopus Island though I so

would have liked to explore that state land. Having grown up in the Town of Esopus, each historic site, each religious institute, each place of note was recognizable as home to me. And while I have always deemed the Hudson River Valley "my kingdom," it is not until this Albany to New York City paddle expedition that it truly became my own.



As I rounded Roger's Point, the large waves behind me washed over my stern. I found that while the tall bow would handle anything, the stern of my kayak was susceptible to backwash. Ahead were the magnificent buildings of the Culinary Institute of America and the Marist College campus.

Passing Poughkeepsie and the Walkway Over the Hudson pedestrian bridge, I made a pit stop at the Pirate Canoe Club. Hal – a stranger quickly turned fast friend – welcomed me at the dock, brought me into the clubhouse to chat with the boys, and served me a soda. I had such a fine time that I more felt I was attending a high school reunion than in the midst of a Hudson River journey.

The stretch to Beacon was longer than I thought it would be – plenty of fighting the wind and I even had a moment of concern as an active lightening storm moved up along the opposite shore. When that precarious situation was compounded by a ship barreling towards me, I found myself saying aloud, "This is not my afternoon!" I have discovered that unlike hiking in which the day will be some sort of weather or another, every hour on the river brings different conditions due to ever changing

and conflicting tides, currents, wind, clouds, sunlight, debris, depth, traffic and weather. Arriving at Beacon at sunset as the sloop Woody Guthrie set sail for a twilight cruise, I could not but express out loud, "It doesn't get any better than this!"

### **Day 5: Friday, September 16 – Beacon to Garrison (10 miles)**

I used the rainy day on Thursday to pick up my car from Rensselaer. I had the good fortune of having season kayak storage at Scenic Hudson's Long Dock Park in Beacon which greatly aided in logistics. From here south, I would be able to make day trips to complete my Albany to New York City journey. So from Beacon, on Friday, I



commenced my trip at 11:00 a.m. Here is an island castle (Bannerman's on Pollepel); the Hudson Highlands' famed mountains (Storm King, Breakneck Ridge, Mount Taurus, Pitching Point, Crow's Nest) all towering over the Hudson River; and the historic complex of the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Most exciting was the bend around Land's End: the tip of Constitution Island which juts far out into the Hudson and making the river bend back on itself in ox bow fashion. It is a fretful place: the river narrows so that currents are strong and the ship channel is near; with the mountains, winds are unpredictable; and the curvature of the island makes it impossible to see what wake-flipping vessel might be barreling up the river. Most intimidating to me is that the tip of Land's End is blunted – not pointed – so that you are suspended in no-man's-land for two hundred yards, and with your tiny craft juxtaposed between the cliffs of Land's End and the channel, there is no escape if danger springs forth.

I ended the day at the Garrison Boat Club where members welcomed me and generously offered to watch over my kayak while I retrieved my car.

## **Day 6: Sunday, September 18 – Garrison to Ossining (20 miles)**

On Saturday, I had promised to help lead an Appalachian Mountain Club hike in Harriman State Park near Bear Mountain. Coincidentally our hiking route – the Ramapo-Dunderberg Trail – overlooked my next kayaking segment in its entirety: Garrison to Ossining.

Starting my paddle at 11 a.m. on Sunday, looking up from my kayak to see the ridges I had hiked the day prior connected me to the land in a special way. This section, too, a

continuation of the Hudson Highlands, were so scenic: Bear Mountain, Anthony's Nose, Dunderberg, Iona Island. The wind and waves particularly picked up after rounding Stony Point, and once again I found myself looking for a place to land if I needed to abort my trip. Measuring my progress against the western shore, the ridgeline of which is the Long Path which I had hiked in the past from Fort Lee to Albany, I felt I was making headway.

Rounding Croton Point, the southern wind and white-capped waves were particularly strong and particularly challenging since I was now heading perpendicular to these forces with one long mile to go directly towards the Ossining shore. A testimony to the seaworthiness of this kayak, I dropped the skeg, paddled, and the kayak made an arrow-straight run to the shore. On the distance dock, I saw a lone fellow at its end. As I approached, the man suddenly shouted, "Skip!" And there stood a fellow who had served with me on the executive committee of Appalachian Club's New York chapter. Unbeknown to me, he belonged to the Ossining Boat Club. "I'll help bring your boat up on the dock," he directed. And he did. "I'll get you a soda," he enthused. And he did. "I will drive you home," he insisted when he learned this section of my Hudson River journey was a day trip. "Actually, my car is in Garrison," I informed him, "and I can take the six o'clock train back – both towns have a station." As I rode that train back up the Hudson with the sun setting over the western hills, I smiled from the depth of my heart as once again a neighbor in this community outside the walls did all he could for me.



## **Day 7: Saturday, September 24 – Ossining to Irvington (10 miles)**

Having returned to work for a week, and a busy weekend, I found myself with a mere three hours on a late Saturday afternoon to paddle. Putting in the river at 2 p.m. I was glad I did, for this was the first time in my entire journey did I experience placid, windless water throughout the day. Particularly fun was that this was my home town: Mount Pleasant. Every foot along the shore I knew from biking the Old Croton Aqueduct, walking through Rockwood Preserve, and visiting the lighthouse park in Tarrytown.



Having learned on this trek that the tall bow of my kayak could handle any wake, I let a fast steaming tugboat and barge pass within 100 yards of me. As I pivoted 90 degrees and paddled into the oncoming surf, I did so with wavering confidence. The swells were no higher than anything I had yet encountered, but the large waves were particularly smooth, well-defined, and curling towards me. When they hit, they rocketed up the bow and hit me square in the chest, and with such force that they more ricocheted off me than poured into the cockpit. I did get a wet seat from the episode and a lesson learned.

Landing at the Scenic Hudson Park in Irvington, as I approached the boat ramp I could see egress from the river was totally blocked by a downed tree. On shore was a family. "Can we help you?" they called out. My simple reply of "yes" brought the mom and dad down the ramp, over the tree, and into the water. Landing the boat was particularly easy with three hands on deck.

A shrine at the landing site with flagpole, bench, and plaque commemorating September 11, 2001 reminded me of why I had chosen this timeframe to make this journey. Sitting on the bench was an elderly gentleman gazing southward with the New York City skyline clearly visible. I pondered what his thoughts might be: the peacefulness of this day or the anguish of that day; the nature beauty of this day or the atrocious smoke billowing upward on that day. Talking to a Catholic priest this past summer, I expressed to him that the severe pain I see at times in the world sometimes impedes me from fully experiencing the presence of God. Pain, he told me allows us to be compassionate. And while I continue to believe we could do with less pain in this world, because of the suffering inflicted on 9/11, I think we no longer look at New York City as a distant glut of anonymous people, but as lots and lots of individuals sharing the same life and sharing the same community as we do.

**Day 8: Friday, October 7 – Irvington to New York City (25 miles)**

Starting this segment at noon time, it was not my intention to finish my journey on this day. But Fate did conclude my journey today, and determined too, where I concluded it. The day began – as did most during this journey – on placid waters. The sky was blue, the air was still, and the day seemed more like lingering summer than early autumn – no different than that morning of 9/11/01.

What was my intention was simply to paddle to the end of The Bronx, leaving Manhattan for another day to fully bask in that final leg. At the end of Westchester, and then at the end of The Bronx, I found no boat club. So with ebb tide and the currents the strongest I had yet experienced on the river, I continued, floating under the George Washington Bridge at an early 2 pm and time for 2 slices of bread for lunch as I drifted southward with the current.

Having arrived in New York City, the question was now where to officially conclude my trek. The 79th Street Boat Basin seemed like the best choice since I knew they store kayaks there, but when I arrived, I did not feel ready to stop. From here, the waters became increasingly choppy, the swells lifting my boat high and then dropping to depths, the waves chaotic as I was under attack from all sides. The bow would crash into an oncoming wave, while another would wash over aft, and at the same time being rolled side to side as waves pounded me port and starboard. I tightened my life jacket. Spying what was probably the Midtown Boathouse, particularly inviting with its large, open storage of kayaks visible, I felt the momentary possibility of safety. Despite knowing I would be welcome there, and even noted kayak docks, I pushed onward. 5 pm – New York City rush-hour. The zenith of the waves and my fears came at the NY Waterway Ferry docks where multiple high speed ferries were zooming in with humongous wakes, and then sprinting out of port throwing up curling surfs that could swamp a kayak like a whale's tail. I kayaked around two departing ferries on one side only to discover two more lurking on the other. 300 yards ahead of me lay the safety of the North Cove Marina in Battery Park City. Like a minefield in The Great War, the distance was short, but I knew that any moment could be my last. Trusting this true sea kayak more than my novice skills, I remembered the reliability of the skeg and flipped it down. Then shortening my stroke and increasing my cadence, I knew that unfortunately my speed would decrease, but knew, too, that my momentum would become consistent and thus avoiding any momentary stall that would cause my craft to become a bobbing saucer to be capsized by the next substantial wave. Stroke, stroke, stroke, stroke.



Focus, focus, focus, focus. Awareness of every wave and every swell from every angle. And finally... past the sea walls of North Cove.

North Cove. Certainly another man's world: moored were the 12 meter racer America II, a full-size sailing frigate, and luxury yachts longer than I can toss a football. Dwarfed by yachts and skyscrapers, I paddled from berth to berth looking for the dock master. I did find a helpful fellow who counseled, "I'm not the dockmaster, but I know that kayaks are not allowed here; I'll let the dockmaster know you are looking for an overnight berth." Five minutes later, the dockmaster's assistant came down the dock, friendly but firmly ordering, "paddle to the north side of the marina and I'll find something for you." I met him at the northern dock where together we hoisted the kayak onto the dock. "It is \$10 per foot; how long is your boat?" he asked. "Well," I answered, "17 feet, but it's real narrow; and it's lying on the dock not taking a berth." "How about \$100?" he proposed. "Can we do \$50?" I countered. He paused, and then stunned me with the following, "The dockmaster told me to take care of you, so it's really whatever you want to pay." I pulled out my currency which were only denominations of \$20, "Here is \$60 and don't give me change since you are already being generous."

As I walked down the dock to leave the chic marina, I passed two boaters chatting. One asked me, "How long did it take you to paddle down from Albany?" Not having counted, I estimated, "5 days." In response his buddy boasted, "I can make Albany in 5 hours!" And there is the difference not only in boats, but in mentality.

After 9/11, it was many years before I would even venture past the World Trade Towers site. And it has been years since I have been there; I did not realize a tower was already being constructed. Walking to the subway, I paused before the monolithic edifice of the new World Trade Tower. I felt compelled to bless myself with the sign of the cross, but felt self-conscious. Yet I did, and immediately felt it was the most natural thing to do. At that moment, I realized that I was brought to this sacred place not by coincidence. And what I thought was a nature trek, had been a pilgrimage.