

OPINION

Writers offer information on canoe monument

Dear Editor,

We are writing regarding the article, "Canoe racing memorial has monumental history," by Karen Rouse, printed in the newspaper on Feb. 2. We offer some corrections.

When the motion was made by John Sawyer to build a monument, it was in 1966, not 1967.

According to the article, Harry Curley spoke with a superintendent from Consumers Power Company. Actually, Ed Adams, president of the Michigan Canoe Racing Association in 1967, accompanied by Harry Curley, an MCRA member, met with the superintendent. Ed got a handshake agreement for permission to place a monument on Consumers Power property, located along the AuSable River between Iargo Springs and Lumberman's Monument.

Work began on the monument in September 1967, not May 1968.

The article states that Jerry Wagner and Harry Curley constructed the monument. This is incorrect. Jerry Wagner and his tender, Ward Hall, laid up the stone.

The article says all the materials were donated by Roy Stewart, then manager of Huron Supply Company. The material for the footings was donated by Roy Stewart, manager of Straits Aggregate of Tawas City, owned by Charles Pinkerton.

The article left out one of the main things people see on the memorial, the crossed paddles at its top. These were made and installed by Al Widing.

Now we will put in correct order the complete history of the Michigan Canoe Racers Association Memorial Monument.

In 1966, at an annual MCRA meeting chaired by President LeRoy Widing, a motion was made by John Sawyer to erect a memorial along the AuSable River. The motion was passed unanimously. Committees were formed for finance, design and location.

After an MCRA meeting in 1967, President Ed Adams informed us there was a handshake deal with Consumers Power Company giving permission to build a memorial on its property along the AuSable River in an area between Iargo Springs and Lumberman's Monument.

The following weekend in September 1967, MCRA Treasurer Ron Raynak and MCRA member Bob Gillings went to Oscoda and talked to Roy Stewart, a friend of Ron's, who was manager of Straits Aggregate. A handshake agreement between Raynak and Stewart was made that he would furnish all the material for the footings with the following conditions: The MCRA would purchase the stone for the memorial from him and would pay the truck driver \$10 to make delivery of material for footings on Saturday. Lastly, we were not to tell anyone about this agreement during his lifetime. The stone was paid for by the MCRA and the truck driver was paid \$10 by an MCRA member. The agreement between Raynak and Stewart was witnessed by Gillings.

The following morning, Raynak and Gillings chose the site for the memorial. That same day, the

forms were built and the footings poured by Raynak, Gillings, Stan Hall and Al Widing.

At a later date, the stone was laid up by Jerry Wagner — a stonemason, former winner of the AuSable River Marathon Canoe Race and a member of the MCRA — and his tender, Ward Hall. Wagner had agreed from the start to lay up the stone and he did not charge the MCRA anything.

At a later date, Al Widing made the crossed paddles and installed these on top of the monument. He donated the paddles and his labor.

When completed, the monument was dedicated as the Michigan Canoe Race Association Memorial Monument on July 28, 1968. Al Widing was president at the time.

Harry Curley was instrumental in taking care of the monument for many years. When the monument was destroyed by a car accident on July 22, 1982, Curley received insurance money from the driver's insurance company and hired Wagner to rebuild the monument. The original paddles remain and, due to Al Widing's care and maintenance, still look good.

Many MCRA members have helped through the years to care for the monument. Ed Adams and Al Widing brought trailer loads of sod from the Fenton area and laid it around the monument. Stan Hall mowed the grass and Bill Staples also mowed and cleaned the area up when he was up north. There were many other contributors, who remain unnamed.

In September 2005 a new plaque was installed on the memorial by Ron Raynak and Bob Gillings.

Attached is a brief history of the MCRA Memorial dated July 23, 1997.

These facts are verified and attested to by the undersigned.

— Robert Gillings
Ronald Raynak
Stanley Hall
Ed Adams
Al Widing Sr.
LeRoy Widing
Dick Gillings

Attachment dated July 23, 1997, signed by Rob Raynak, Stanley Hall, Ed Adams, Robert Gillings, Albert Widing Sr. and LeRoy Widing:

The reason for this document is to establish the true history of the Michigan Canoe Racing Association Memorial. This was requested by Lynn Witte, present president of the MCRA.

The purpose of this memorial was to honor departed members of the MCRA and it will serve as a reminder to those men and those who follow of their dedication to the sport of canoe racing.

The idea for the memorial came about at a meeting of the MCRA by John Sawyer. Roy Widing was president of the MCRA at that time.

In 1967, the MCRA raised \$500 for the purpose of building such a memorial. Ed Adams was president and had a handshake agreement with Consumers Power Company that this monument could be built on the banks of the AuSable River.

The project got started in 1967, when MCRA Treasurer Ron Raynak and Bob Gillings went to Oscoda and picked a spot on the AuSable River on River Road. They ordered cement and gravel and the footing was poured the same day by Ron Raynak, Bob Gillings, Stan Hall and Al Widing.

At a later date, Jerry Wagner laid up the brick. Al Widing made the paddles and donated them to the MCRA.

The dedication was held in 1968. Al Widing was president of the MCRA at the time.

All those involved in building this monument were members of the MCRA, all labor was donated and the materials were either donated or paid for by the MCRA.

Editor's Note: While this letter is longer than we generally allow, we think the importance of local history warrants its publication.

We certainly appreciate the additional information and hope our readers find it as fascinating as we do.

The February article about the memorial was researched and written at the request of Ron Raynak, who was concerned that the public did not recognize the Michigan Canoe Racing Association's role in its existence, given a common local misconception that this was the work of one family, rather than of the MCRA. The article clearly stated that there is debate about the early history.

That said, we weren't there when the monument was proposed or built. The article offered information provided by others from memory or documents. For the record, the sources of the disputed information are as follows:

The year shown in the article as to when John Sawyer made a motion to build the memorial was based on a copy of a letter, signed and provided by Ron Raynak. "In 1967, that vision became a reality. The officers and general membership, at an open MCRA meeting, voted to take \$500 from the treasury to build a monument on the river."

The article does not list the year that work began on the original monument. Rather, it quotes an update by the monument committee and identifies the information as originating from a May 1968 MCRA newsletter.

The issue of whether Harry Curley helped build the first memorial has long been debated. According to his daughter, he did work alongside Jerry Wagner.

The information on Roy Stewart's role, as it appeared in the article, came from *About This Monument* written by the late Jerry Wagner. He stated: "Roy Stewart, manager of Huron Building Supply Company, at the time furnished every bit of the material free to me. He even hauled it there so I could build the memorial."

2A - Oscoda Press, Oscoda, Mi., Wednesday, June 21, 2006

OPINION

A Curley was catalyst for monument

Dear Editor,

I am writing in regard to the canoe monument article.

As a member of the Michigan Canoe Racing Association Canoe Memorial Monument Committee that was formed at the 2005 Klondike Canoe Race, I agree with the facts that were presented and that it wasn't the work of just the Curley family.

I believe the catalyst for the monument was the death of Jerry Curley, who died practicing for the Ausable Marathon in 1953.

I think that after 20+ years of being instrumental in the maintenance of the canoe monument and saving it from certain legal destruction, it isn't hard to believe that such a myth or legend of one family having all to do with the canoe monument could come about.

On a new note, I would like to say that it is an honor to be on the MCRA Canoe Memorial Monument Committee with members like Al Widing, Bob Gillings, Stan Hall, Ron Raynak and Lynn Witte, just to name a few. The

MCRA formed this committee so that we could move ahead and get more names of deserving people that should be inducted on the monument.

When this committee was formed in 2005, no one could agree on what the requirements were to be eligible to get a name put on the monument. It took some time and lots of grinding out the details; in the end, we came up with some reasonable restrictions.

There will be a ceremony honoring more paddlers this year at 3 p.m. July 15, which is the weekend of the Harry Curley Memorial Canoe Race. It is a good weekend to see some of the best paddlers in the world and pay homage to those that have passed and were dedicated to the sport of canoe racing. The two local paddlers being inducted this year are Jerry Grant and Bill Dingman.

—Justin Griffith
Oscoda
Grandson of Harry Curley