



Canoe racing memorial has monumental history MCRA committee dedicated to preserving monument to canoe racers

Editor's Note: *There's been a lot of controversy through the years over canoer's monument. Nearly every aspect — from its inspiration to who chose the location, to site ownership, to who built it — even its name has been debated.*

About the only issue not in contention is the respect which canoe racers have for the monument and the pride families experience when the name of a loved one is added to its bronze plaque.

Reporter Karen Rouse has attempted to sort out the monument history. The following account is based on documents, photographs and interviews.

Special thanks to Ron Raynak, Sylvia Curley-Harmon, Consumers Energy and the U.S. Forest Service for their collective assistance with the research for this article.

by Karen Rouse

OSCODA — The story of the monument honoring canoe racers begins in 1953, shortly after the death of 17-year-old Jerry Curley, an Oscoda canoe racer.

An AuSable business owner, John Sawyer, is credited with the idea. He wanted to erect a monument to remember Jerry and other racers who had died.

The idea faded after failing to spark interest within the community or the newly formed Michigan Canoe Racers Association (MCRA), which was founded in 1955.

It came up again at the MCRA annual meeting in 1967. Someone suggested money be allocated towards a monument honoring those who had raced in the AuSable River Marathon and who had died. The motion was approved and \$500 was directed to a monu-

Former marathon champion Ron Raynak of AuSable remembers choosing the site to lay the footings.

He said that he and Robert Gillings walked the targeted area between Iargo Springs and Lumberman's Monument and chose the spot with the most remarkable view.

Legend has it that there was a handshake deal for use of the property and uncertainty over whether the land belonged to Consumers or the U.S. Forest Service.

Work began. In the MCRA May 1968 newsletter, an update states:

"The Monument Committee reports that the footings are all laid for the monument. Harry Curley has the stone and is going to contact someone to do the brick work, which will probably take all the money left in the kitty. Thanks go to Al Widing, Bob Gillings, Stan Hall and Ron Raynak for laying the footings. They dug the footings and mixed and poured cement for the job."

Jerry Wagner, Oscoda, and Harry Curley constructed the memorial with material donated by Roy Stewart, then the manager of Huron Building Supply Company.

Completed, the monument was dedicated as the "Michigan Canoe Race Association Memorial Monument" on July 28, 1968. Four deceased paddlers were honored and listed on the plaque: Jerry Curley, Henry Feldhauser, Arthur Furtaw Jr. and Jerry Lauwers.

Research indicates a troubled past for the monument was to follow. Neglect of the site prompted Harry Curley to take responsibility — physically and financially — for the maintenance. Providing brick repair, viewing platforms, lawn mowing and flower beds became a labor of love.

On July 22, 1982, an automo-

Harry Curley and Jerry Wagner reconstructed the monument with insurance money received from the accident claim.

Curley - Harmon remembers the installation of a new brass plaque, replacing the original white metal one which had disappeared. Shortly thereafter, the brass plaque was stolen.

Harry Curley replaced it with a wooden plaque renaming the monument "The Jerry Curley Memorial Canoe Race Monument." The stolen brass plaque was later returned by Sylvia's nephew, Kevin Curley, never revealing who gave it to him.

In addition to generating a new monument, the automobile accident also resulted in

a Consumers Power investigation into the ownership of the site. This determined that the monument did sit mostly on Consumers Energy property, with 15 feet of the property owned by the U.S. Forest Service.

By autumn of 1982, Harry Curley was publicly worried about who would take over the care of the monument.

"I'm 72 years old and am not going to be able to take care of this forever," he said in an Oct. 21 newspaper article.

Curley asked Iosco County to provide for the future maintenance of the monument and grounds. He and Wagner later withdrew the request when the name of the monument could not be agreed upon.

In March of 1984, Oscoda took the monument under its wing as part of the Oscoda Park System, under an agreement with Consumers.

Then, in 1986, the U.S. Forest Service acquired the property from the utility company.

Forest Service District Ranger Calvin Norton wrote Wagner in April of 1989, proposing that the monument be relocated nearer to the finish line of the AuSable River International Canoe Marathon.

Norton wrote: "...the memorial just does not fit the theme that might be developed in the future along this corridor," referring to the scenic byway.

The declaration raised an uproar in the community and elsewhere in the state. Protests were plentiful and vehement.

An emotional meeting was held in June of 1989, at which time Norton relented.

Today, there is no dispute over its continued existence or ownership, according to the current district ranger, Charles Andrina. The U.S. Forest Service owns and manages the land on which the monument sits and Oscoda Township has a special use permit for the maintenance of the structure.

Andrina adds that the U.S. Forest Service has a continued interest in being partners with the MCRA for future improvements to the monument site.

The Michigan Canoe Racing Association Memorial Monument is dedicated to past paddlers who raced in the AuSable River Marathon and continues to preserve the memory of those involved in canoe racing.



File photo by Holly Nelson
MONUMENT II — The second monument as it appeared at the July 11, 2005, Canoer's Memorial Monument induction ceremony. Pictured, from left, are MCRA representatives Ron Raynak, Lynne Witte and Ron Hohman.

noe racing.

Nineteen names of former racers are engraved on the monument, thanks to the efforts of many people that have come forward to volunteer their time to create and maintain the monument throughout the years.

There is one other name on the monument, that of Harry Curley. Not a racer, he was honored as an avid promoter of the AuSable race by the MCRA, according to a 1994 dedication program.

Last March, the MCRA formed a 15-member committee dedicated to monument preservation. New guidelines for name submissions were discussed and implemented, adapting old guidelines.

To be inducted on the monument, MCRA requirements dictate that a person has entered the AuSable River Marathon and finished the race. Those honored

must also have died.

A form was developed to aid people in submitting names of others who meet the criteria, Raynak said.

Raynak hopes to put as many as 10 more names on the monument this summer. Induction nominations are due by March 15. Call 739-2591 to obtain a form.

Another purpose of the committee is raising money to add future names.

"Each name plate is at least \$75," Treasurer Curley-Harmon revealed. A fundraiser, called A Bakeless Bake Sale MCRA, will begin soon.

Harmon accepts donations for the monument year-round. Checks can be made out to MCRA Canoer's Memorial Monument and mailed to 3294 Chippewa Dr., Oscoda, MI 48750.



Photo by Karen Rouse

LOOKING BACK — Sylvia Curley-Harmon reviews recorded history of the monument.

ment committee.

It is lost as to why the monument was located in Oscoda. Sylvia Curley-Harmon, Oscoda, suggests that her father, Harry Curley, proposed it.

According to one story, Harry spoke with a superintendent from Consumers Energy (then Consumers Power), who agreed it could be located somewhere between Iargo Springs and Lumberman's Monument, on the bank overlooking the AuSable River.

bile and a drunk driver demolished the monument. The accident happened prior to River Road being moved back away from the river, after the road's designation as a scenic byway.

No deaths were reported in the accident and Curley was quoted in 1983: "If the monument hadn't been there, they'd probably have gone over the cliff, right down there in the woods and probably nobody would have ever found them, not for a long time."



From a photo by John Penrod
THE ORIGINAL canoer's monument, as it appeared prior to being destroyed by a drunk driver in 1982. The original plaque has disappeared.