

Guide

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ers down the wild rapids.

In recognition of her years on the river and her considerable impact on the rafting business, Hockmeyer has earned the informal title “The Queen of the Kennebec,” bestowed affectionately but respectfully by her clients, colleagues and competitors. It’s a title she seems to accept and enjoy.

“Everyone takes her pretty seriously,” said Hockmeyer’s business partner Russell Walters, who has known her since 1983. “She’s very empathetic. She has longevity. There’s nothing in this company or this business that Suzie hasn’t done.”

“[Hockmeyer] is a big part of the social glue that holds it all together,” he said.

Born Suzie Yeaton, Hockmeyer was born and raised in Andover, Massachusetts, but spent summers on her grandfather’s farm in Belgrade, where she learned to love the natural world. She attended Phillips Academy in Andover and then earned a two-year liberal arts degree from Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill.

“I was smart, but I had no interest in school,” she said. “I learn so much more by doing things than by reading about them.”

She moved to Rockwood on Moosehead Lake in 1975 with Wayne, a hunting and fishing guide who grew up in Lowell, Massachusetts and spent childhood summers in the Rumford area. He opened an outfitting business; Suzie kept the books. They were intent on building a family, a community and a life in the outdoors.

At the time, she said, outdoor recreation in Maine primarily consisted of hunting and fishing. Hiking for its own sake was relatively

rare. There were plenty of canoes on the lakes and rivers but not a single kayak.

And there certainly was no whitewater rafting.

The bold excursion into the Kennebec gorge changed all that. Exhilarated by the rapids in the gorge and encouraged by established rafting companies in West Virginia, the Hockmeyers printed up some black-and-white brochures, bought a second-hand cattle truck to bring adventurers from Moosehead Lake to Harris Station and started marketing their rafting expeditions at local businesses.

Bars were a pretty good place to sign people up, Suzie Hockmeyer recalled. That first summer, they carried 600 people safely through the Kennebec gorge.

“That first year, it was just us,” she said. “The second year, there were three companies rafting here, and it took off from there.”

This year, 23 rafting companies are licensed and regulated through the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. Most are clustered near The Forks, where the more challengingly raftable Dead River flows into the Kennebec. They form the basis of economic activity in this tiny Somerset County community, which has a year-round population of about 30. Other companies, including Northern Outdoors, maintain centers on the Penobscot River near Millinocket. These three rivers — the Kennebec, the Dead and the Penobscot — are the only rivers currently being rafted for whitewater in Maine.

Rafting is a complex business, requiring cooperative relationships among competing companies as well as with landowners, commercial dam operators and other recreational users of the waterways.

In order to protect all af-



Suzie Hockmeyer (right) navigates the waters of the Kennebec River with Emily Yearwood while helping to guide a trip recently in The Forks.

ASHLEY L. CONTI | BDN

ected entities and prevent a monopoly, “it’s regulated like a public utility,” according to former state senator Peter Mills, who served in the Maine Senate and House from 1995 to 2010. “You can’t just let everyone out on the river; it would get all jammed up.”

Northern Outdoors takes thrill-seeking rafters down the Kennebec, Penobscot and Dead rivers — about 9,000 people per year

Initially, he said, each rafting company in Maine was licensed for just one year at a time. Licences were retired at the end of the season and reissued the following year according to a complicated and unpredictable system that governed how many days each company could be on the river, how many rafts they could use and other factors.

“It made it so the rafting companies had no certainty

from one year to the next,” Mills said. Many were eager to expand their operations and their facilities, but the lack of predictability made it impossible to borrow money.

In the mid-’90s, Mills worked closely with Suzie Hockmeyer and other rafting advocates to understand and address the challenges the industry faced.

“She was always the most articulate person in the room — the one who could clearly explain what the businesses needed to survive,” he said. Whether it was negotiating additional releases of water from the dams, increasing the number of allowable trips per day or establishing a seniority-based schedule for put-in times, he said, Hockmeyer stayed focused and positive in pushing for sensible regulatory changes that would allow the industry to grow. “She was in it for the long haul,” he said.

In addition, Mills said, Hockmeyer sustained an early vision of the role rafting could play in developing year-round, family-friendly

tourism in the Kennebec Valley. By expanding into hiking, mountain biking, fishing hunting, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing and other outside activities, he said, many rafting companies — including Northern Outdoors — now stay open all year long, bringing essential visitors and their recreational dollars to some of Maine’s most rural areas.

“They used to say that the key to success is to find interesting things for people to do on their second night in Maine, even if it means sharing business with a competitor,” Mills said. “That’s how this small-town industry operates, and Suzie set the tone.”

All summer long, Northern Outdoors takes thrill-seeking rafters down the Kennebec, Penobscot and Dead rivers — about 9,000 people per year. Many are repeat customers who come back to share the adventure with friends or family members.

On a recent sunny weekday, Suzie Hockmeyer teamed up with rafting guide Emily Yearwood to guide one of six Northern

Outdoors boats down the Kennebec gorge. There were several young children in the group, some recent high school graduates and numerous members of a family from Massachusetts returning for their eighth or ninth vacation at Northern Outdoors. The 12-mile trip would take about four hours, including a leisurely lunch-time rest with great food cooked and served by the guides.

Clearly at ease and in her element as the group set out, Hockmeyer strapped on her yellow helmet and green life preserver, grasped her plastic paddle and helped hoist the heavy rubber raft down the long stairway to the foot of the Harris Station dam.

After the boat’s five other paddlers were settled excitedly at their stations along the gunnels, she and Yearwood climbed into their positions in the stern and pushed off into the rising water, toward the bend in the river and the first big rapids of the Kennebec.

The trip leader that day was registered guide Sandy Howard, 41, who teaches music at Keene State College in New Hampshire when she’s not guiding for Northern Outdoors. During the lunch break, Howard said Hockmeyer already had “broken the glass ceiling” for women long before Howard first starting guiding in 1997. While most rafting guides are male, the work also appeals to many women, she said.

Despite rafting’s reputation as a testosterone-fueled world of daredevilry and machismo, Howard said, she has never felt intimidated or put down by her male trainers, co-workers or clients on the river.

“I think that is largely Suzie’s influence,” she said. “She is a strong woman, mentally and physically. She’s not afraid to speak her mind and remind people that everyone is capable. People don’t question Suzie.”

Curves

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As a 4-H member, the annual fair was part of my job. We were there for setup and breakdown. We always had someone from the club in the barns where our animals were. We arrived early in the morning and went home in the evening.

People enjoyed visiting our barns, and appreciated the agricultural nature of the event. Some came from farms; others from the city. The midway, which is how we referred to the carnival rides and doughboy stands,

was a sideshow.

Now it is reversed. With dwindling dairy and beef farms in this area, the agricultural part of the fair has become the side show and the primary attraction for visitors has become the carnival.

There’s still 4-H, but there are no longer multiple show tents for large animals, or huge displays of stitchery, canned goods, jellies, jams and baked foods. The displays used to be set up in Bangor Auditorium; now the displays are so diminished in number, they can fit in a much smaller space.

The fair that was begun

to show off Maine’s best agricultural efforts is becoming just another entertainment venue. It saddens me to see that trend.

I don’t attend the fair every year. Before my husband, Jim, died of pancreatic cancer in December 2010, we would try to go and visit the livestock barns and talk to people there, watch special demonstrations and just wander around. He and I would sit under the bingo tent for a few rounds, laughing at how we had become some of the old people we used to make fun of when we saw them sitting under the bingo tent.

The rides and games these days don’t interest me much, but I do go support the 4-H when I am able, visit the barns and remember more robust farming days. The smells of animal waste, hay and straw that wrinkles the noses of most visitors kindles a kind of peace in my soul, and stirs some very special memories.

I like to talk to the farm families, especially the 4-H kids — some of whom are grandchildren of the kids I used to know and show with at the fair. I cannot help but wonder if their grandchildren will have the same opportunities.

As a longtime employee of the Bangor Daily News, Julie Harris has served many roles over the years, but she now has her dream job as community editor. She lives in Hermon with her four Brittany dogs:

Sassy, Bullet, Thistle and Quincy, who keep her busy in various dog sports. She was widowed at age 51 when her husband, Jim, died of pancreatic cancer. Follow her blog at curves.bangordailynews.com.

Haskell

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so many vibrant, resourceful Mainers in their 50s, 60s, 70s and older. A few jump immediately to mind. There was the group of ladies in the tiny town of Mattawakeag putting on a free lunch each week to draw the community together. The artist in Appleton whose remarkable sculpture is on display in the ambassador’s residence in Qatar. The elderly woman in Belfast who got scammed out of her life savings, the couple in Levant who are raising their grand-

daughter, the retired professor who’s teaching baby boomers to make better use of their smartphones and the guy from Lincolnville who visits nursing homes with his beguiling therapy pig.

I also have been honored to meet and profile some iconic Mainers who’ve made lasting contributions to our culture, including energy expert professor Richard Hill; social reformer Lucy Poulin of the H.O.M.E. cooperative in Orland; Sen. Susan Collins, pouring coffee and talking about public policy issues over her kitchen table in Bangor; organic farming pioneer and conservationist

Mort Mather and — just last week — Suzie Hockmeyer of The Forks, who with her former husband, Wayne, is widely credited with establishing whitewater rafting in Maine.

All in all, it’s been an enormously gratifying year of work and learning. Now, along with all of you, I’m looking forward to what comes next. Mostly, I’m hoping to expand the discussion with my readers — to know more about the conversations you’re having, the issues on your mind, the problems you’re encountering and the solutions you’re finding. What are your goals for the future and how are you get-

ting there? How’s your garden doing this year? What new hobbies are you picking up? What’s in your way, and who’s inspiring you?

Seriously — give me a call at 990-8066 or drop me a note at mhaskell@bangordailynews.com. I’d love to chat. And thanks for the great year — it’s been a privilege.

Read more of Meg Haskell at livingitforward.bangordailynews.com.

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