



# 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

## Kenduskeag Stream Canoe Race

BY AIMEE THIBODEAU  
SPECIAL SECTIONS EDITOR

Fifty years after paddlers first took to the Kenduskeag Stream for the inaugural canoe race, the event is still going strong and has become the most popular whitewater race in Maine.

Bangor's iconic canoe race attracts about 1,000 participants each year, with thousands of spectators — lovingly dubbed river vultures — lining the stream banks to watch as paddlers tackle the rapids.

The original race was the brainchild of Lew Gilman, who died in 2011, and Edwin “Sonny” Colburn.

The actual conversation is reported in “Tales of the Kenduskeag” by Jim Smith and Fern Stearns, to have been a phone call that went like this:

Ed: “Lew, what do you think about having a canoe race on the Kenduskeag?”

Lew: “It sounds like a helluva good idea to me. Let’s meet tonight — get started right off.”

As a co-owner of Rivers & Gilman Molded Products in Hampden, Gilman once made simulated birchbark canoes that bore the tradename “Indian.” He later worked for the Old Town Canoe Co.

A lifelong Bangor resident, Colburn grew up in a large house near Six Mile Falls on Outer Broadway along the Kenduskeag Stream.

Gilman and Colburn first met in high

school, and then encountered each other again through the Air National Guard.

In the late 1960s, the duo came up with the idea for the canoe race and eventually found a sponsor with Bangor Parks and Recreation.

The first canoe committee members were: Tony Trafton, Ed McKeon, Braley Gray Jr. from Old Town Canoe, Earl Baldwin, Lynn, Colburn, and Gilman. After Wendell Easler of Old Town Canoe spoke to the group about water safety, there were some concerns, according to a 1991 Bangor Daily News story.

*The current course record of 1:50:08 is held by Robert Lang of Renforth, New Brunswick, who set the record in 1997. He has a total of 11 race wins.*

In recent years, Lincoln Search and Rescue and Dirigo Search and Rescue have been the go-to safety crews for paddlers navigating the stream.

Lincoln is stationed at Six Mile Falls, a tricky whitewater area where paddlers often tip their canoes and kayaks. Dirigo, a larger operation from the Bangor area, patrols rapids below the falls, focusing on a series of rapids known as The Shopping Cart. And each year, a number of smaller search and rescue teams also are on hand to help, including members of Down East

Emergency Medical Institute, Pine State Radio Amateur Club, and students from United Technology Center’s Public Safety Program.

That first year of the race, in April 1967, one report notes that seven of the 32 canoes that attempted to maneuver the stream failed to complete the course. Another says there were 34 canoes that raced that first year.

No matter how many took part that first year, it’s known that more than 28,000 paddlers have participated in the race since 1967.

Numerous records have been set over the years, but the current course completion

In addition to the record setters, there are a few fan favorites each year. Zip Kellog of Bangor stands in his canoe as he maneuvers the course each year. Kellog is always dressed for success in a suit and tie, the bow of his canoe decorated with flowers. Gumby — yes, like the cartoon character — is another crowd favorite that’s been part of the race since the early 90s. The green team even was featured once in Sports Illustrated magazine.

And while the participants are the focus of the race, it’s the spectators that create the atmosphere year after year.

“I think the spectators are what makes the race so much fun,” Gilman said in a 1991 interview. He mentioned how many people arrive hours early to claim a favorite rock for viewing. “We’ve seen them there year after year. They make the race special.”

record of 1:50:08, set in 1997, is held by Robert Lang of Renforth, New Brunswick. Lang is a well-known name among Kenduskeag Stream Canoe Race paddlers, having won a total of 11 times.



Zip Kellog makes his way down river at Six Mile Falls on April 17, 2010.  
BDN FILE

Bangor's Local Outdoor Outfitter

**25% OFF** THRU 4/16/16  
**PADDLESPORTS**

EXCLUDES ZRE PADDLES & CONSIGNMENT

**EPIC SPORTS**

6 CENTRAL ST.  
DOWNTOWN BANGOR  
(207) 941-5670

Java Joe's Café  
98 Central St. • 990-0500

**FREE**  
small coffee  
with ANY purchase  
when you bring in this ad