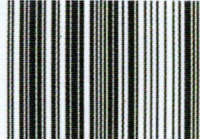




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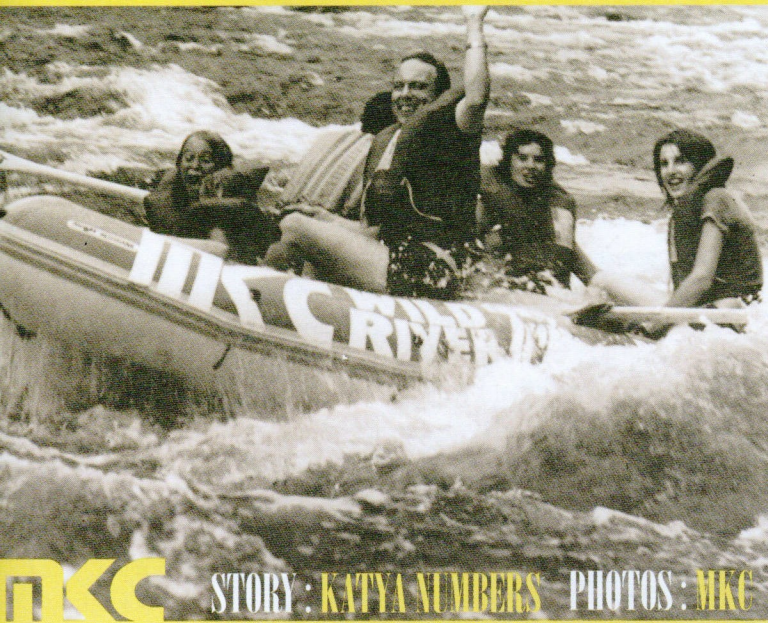


HISTORY ON THE OTTAWA

TRY ME!

INTERVIEW WITH CLAUDIA VAN WIJK





STORY: KATYA NUMBERS PHOTOS: MKC

With the first ascent of Everest in 1953, Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary climbed into a mythical realm of achievement in the mountaineering community. Successive generations would refine the style of ascent, but the venue itself was the biggest nature had to offer and would never be topped. Kayakers first paddled into their own mythical realm in the early 1970s, when a handful of boaters successfully ran some of the biggest and wildest rivers on the planet. At the leading edge of this bold new breed were Hermann and Christa Kerckhoff, German imports and world class kayaking champions that had migrated to Canada in the 1950's. Like Norgay and Hillary, and other first ascensionists before them, the Kerckhoffs possessed not only technical genius, but the vision and courage to challenge psychological barriers in search of the physical limit. Their family found this limit, and surpassed it in 1974, when Herman and his daughter Claudia logged the first ever descent down the now infamous Rocher Fondue rapids on the Ottawa River.

Recently Bomb Flow had the chance to sit down with Claudia Kerckhoff-van Wijk to catch up via web chat. She spoke to us about her experiences as a pioneer in the whitewater community starting at the young age of 14, caught us up to speed on where her family's businesses MKC and OWL stand today, and shared with us her visions for the future of North America's most pristine rivers. This article is based on our interview with her (well, at least the parts we could make out given Ben's knack for interruption and the subsequent derailing of conversation that followed), and in the end we hope to have imparted at least some of the progressive vision and sense of environmental stewardship that Claudia, and all of the stories she shared with us, exude.

The Descent...

A chance encounter and discussion with the Lomoth brothers during the Toronto Sportsman show was all it took to plant the seed in Hermann Kerckhoff's mind. There was "big whitewater" in the Ottawa Valley they said, virgin whitewater. It was 1974 and Claudia, despite holding the title of Canadian Women's Kayaking Champion, was only 14 at the time. Age aside she was without question one of the more mature paddlers out there, and it didn't take her father long to enlist her for the task. Soon after, the family packed up and headed towards the Valley to see what the Lomethes were talking about for themselves. Turns out the brothers were right. There was big whitewater out there for sure. Now, the Kerckhoffs decided, they were going to be the first ones to paddle it.

The morning of the descent, Claudia and her father waved goodbye to her mother Christa, her younger sister Annette, and baby Ina as the family clamored off downstream to wait for the pair at the 'half-way' mark. Bobbing next to the shore, patiently waiting for her father to haul his fiberglass boat down to her, Claudia describes the eagerness she felt surveying what had until then been uncharted waters. Right out of the gate they hit islands; islands now familiar to any paddler who has floated this stretch of river, but islands that quickly turned the river into a veritable maze of micro currents. When they reached what is now known as Sullivan Island, there were two options: Head down river main straight ahead, or follow the current river-right. They chose to go right, Mistake. Almost instantly all semblance of their great whitewater adventure had disappeared, and instead, they found themselves winding their way through farmers' fields on glassy water; a "wild goose chase" as Claudia called it. Ah, but wait. Maybe they hadn't made a mistake after all... Just ahead on the horizon a large rapid slowly began shirking into view. This, it turns out, was Black Shoot. What lay beyond it are the now legendary Rocher Fondue rapid. To Claudia and her father that day, what lay beyond it might effectively be surmised as the start of "everything else". One after the other, father and daughter plowed head-on into what is only now known as Bus Eater and the Waikiki Waves. From there they rounded into Butcher's Knife and Normans before cranking into the Coliseum (tid-bit: formerly known as the "Schnecke", the German word for snail, in honor of friend Matt Wells and his impressively slow paddling technique). From here, the duo exited Coli-West which launched them into the right of Dog's Leg. Next up was Farmer Black's, followed by Bruce's Rapid and lastly Muskrat-all tackled with the same aplomb and finesses as everything that had come before. When they finally paddled out, they found a gaggle of petrified fam-



members waving wildly to them from the shore. It turned out they had paddled the Main Channel of the Ottawa's Rocher Fondu rapids, while their family had hiked into Garvin's waterfall on the Middle Channel where they had been waiting anxiously for hours.

"At the end of the day though, we all met up. We were just elated beyond explanation! We had just found a white water paradise!" Claudia exclaims; the story literally toppling out of her as she recounts to us the course they ran that day as if she's tracing her finger along a roadmap etched in her memory. Maybe it's the result of successive retellings, or possibly several decades of reflection, but I've begun to notice that the majority of this narrative was conspicuously void of words like "hesitation", "nerves" or "doubt". I'm impressed and dejected all at the same time. This woman is the real deal, I should have been taking better notes.

The Businesses...

Two years before their historic first descent (and the same year Hermann competed in the 1972 Munich Olympics) the Kerckoff's began the Madawaska Kanu Center, Canada's first whitewater paddling school. Well, actually, it turns out it was the world's first whitewater school, but who's keeping track of "firsts" at this point. Claudia tells us about how her family chose the middle section of the Madawaska River after much research for its ability to have consistent water all summer long. This is due entirely to a progressive co-operative arrangement with Ontario Hydro that allows for daily water releases from the Bark Lake Dam upstream. These daily releases keep the water level constant, and consistency in turn becomes a litmus test for students of MKC. When they ask Claudia why the water is running so low some days, she smiles and tells them the water stays the same, they've just gotten better.

When MKC was first established its instructors were predominately friends of Hermann and Christa that they had met on the 'international racing circuit'; world champions from around Europe and America who had come to help build the present-day, week-long program. The original paddling school began as a 5 day slalom camp modeled after the European ski schools of the time. Students embarked on an intense four days training regiment with an accomplished instructor and other paddlers of like abilities, a fifth day down the Ottawa, and in true Euro-style, ample amounts of après eating and drinking. 2012 will mark the 40th anniversary for MKC, and in most ways little has changed since then. They still boast an impressive international staff chalked full of world champions, and can effectively say they have employed over 1,000 of the world's best kayakers across the last four decades with close to 5,000 students passing through each year. Ten years after starting MKC, Dirk (Claudia's then boyfriend) began OWL Rafting for the Kerchkoffs in 1981. Serving as a natural progression from MCK, OWL introduced non-experienced paddlers to the world of whitewater through rafting. This year marks the 30th anniversary for OWL; which stands out from its competitors by focusing first and foremost on an amazing river experience. (If you want to party all night, take it down to Wilderness Tours folks). Both businesses were bought by Claudia and her husband Dirk in the late 1980's, and still remain in the family. Today MKC on the Madawaska River and OWL Rafting on the Ottawa River remain industry leaders and are renowned world-wide.

The future...

Fifteen years ago the Ottawa experienced a series of extremely low water seasons in succession. Bark Lake failed to reach its water level quotient, and Ontario Hydro subsequently decided that it would not be releasing any water for recreation that year. This, obviously, would not do. Rather than sitting on her hands and waiting for the Dam to reverse its decision, Claudia traveled further upstream to the Ministry of Natural Resources and simply asked if they would be willing to release some of their water. They agreed. The next step was bringing the Hydro and Ministry together to talk, something that oddly enough the two water management bodies had never done before. Three years, and numerous meetings later, the Madawaska Plan was put into effect. Today this Plan successfully serves as a template for other large water cooperatives in Canada and the US, pulling in various awards over the last ten years.





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“It’s pretty cool that a little kayaking school like ours had such an impact like that on our rivers. Instead of just bitching and complaining, we showed that we could make a real difference.”

Another issue that the Kerckhoffs feel passionately about is water access rights for paddlers. Claudia’s parents had the foresight and gumption to recognize that it wasn’t their right, or anyone’s right, to possess and limit access to a river that belongs to everyone. It was important from the beginning that MKC’s put-in on the Ottawa was, and will always be free and open to the whitewater community. Through MKC’s example, and paddler pressure, in the last five years the Kawaolski’s have also opened Wilderness Tours’ put-in for public access. Together through their example, these two schools are hoping to send a message to other private land owners that rivers should be free to everyone. After all, paddlers care about river access issues and are always willing to give back when granted a reasonable request. The whitewater community strives to be aware of, and respectful towards, both the land and the landowners in turn. Most of all, Claudia tells us that she hopes paddlers across North America will continue to be good ambassadors for the sport so that our rivers never become embargoed in the European-sense, with private owners controlling the waters (and their content) both above and below the surface. Lord knows that if paddling became a “rich man’s” sport over here most of the paddlers we know would be shit-out-of-a-job. (Seriously. If they had to pay for the sport how would they afford the copious amounts of alcohol that are mandatory for peak performance?)



And it matters a lot. If you’re reading this right now and you’re a paddler, well then access matters to you too. This is something that we’re dealing with right here in our own backyard on the Yellowstone River. There is no doubt that it’s going to take some organizing and a whole lot of mature, respectful and motivated paddlers to actually change federally mandated laws and regulations, but with enough people it can be done. Take a chapter out of Claudia’s book: Instead of just bitching and complaining, show them that you can make a real difference.