

LAST YEAR'S RACE—Don Burnison, Grants Pass, was in the lead last year when this picture was taken during the Boatnik. On the return trip, however, the boat had mechanical difficulty, and John Walker, in left, background, won the race.

Aquatic Fever Will Reach Its Climax With White Water Race

By PRISCILLA AVERILL
Mail Tribune Correspondent
Grants Pass — Each year about this time an annual aquatic fever seems to seize the people around Grants Pass.

It reaches a climax next week end with a two-day festival known as the "Boatnik," capped by a wild 50-mile white water race down the Rogue to Galice and back.

It's a race which many have started but few have finished, because the Rogue holds all the odds. A slam-bang affair, in which speed is not always the deciding factor, it's no run for amateurs. Most contestants are professional boatmen and local youths skilled in the ways of the Rogue.

Started Five Years Ago

It all started on Memorial Day five years ago. From the first Boatnik it was apparent that the combination of lightweight high-powered boats and the famed white water of the Rogue provided a spectacular challenge for skilled "white water cowboys," and it has grown every year since then to become the major white water marathon on the west coast, drawing intrepid boaters from Washington to California.

This year it was moved from its traditional Memorial

Day date and expanded into a two-day festival, June 1 and 2, to make room for a Saturday afternoon of closed course races before the big run on Sunday. Many contestants will enter boats in both events.

Though many a skilled rapid-shooter has failed to finish the wild water marathon, they still keep trying for one thing, the rewards are high, \$1,000 first prize and others in proportion—and each year brings more entries.

Perhaps from experience gained in previous tries, the percentage finishing each year also seems to go up along with the number of entries.

Only Four Finish

In the first Boatnik year, 1959, out of a field of 13 entrants, only four made it to the finish line. The next year the Rogue was again the big winner, besting all but three out of 13 starters. From then on, however, the odds started to improve, and last year 15 boats out of a field of 24 managed to shoot their way back over the finish line. The winner, Johnny Walker, of Trinidad, Calif., set a new record for the course: 1 hour, 43.4 seconds.

This year's Boatnik will have approximately 30 entrants, the largest field ever

to start the run. The boats are raced under the rules of the United Speed Boat Racing association, allowing 45 cubic inch maximum displacement for motors, with no restriction on size of boat.

For the past couple of years the first prize has been captured by Californians, but this year a Rogue river guide, Grant Garcia, of Galice, has high hopes of keeping it in Oregon with the first true hydroplane ever to make the run.

Skims on Air Cushion

Unlike the runabouts usually entered in this type race, it skims along on a cushion of air, touching the water with only a small area of the tail and a thin "sponson" on either side.

It was Garcia's father, Ruben Garcia, of Grants Pass, who more or less provided the spark which started the whole idea five years ago. A skilled white water boatman who had raced in both Oregon and California, he began to wonder why there was no such event on his home river, the Rogue, which had everything the other rivers did, only more so.

He talked it up with other racers, and all agreed. Not only did the Rogue have more sensational ruffles than the

other rivers they raced, but it also had more accessibility. On the stretch between Grants Pass and Galice, more people could gain access to the river, making it a veritable spectators' paradise.

Follows Naturally

The rest followed naturally. Don (Bowser) Johnson, now of Medford, who often rode with Garcia, was at that time an officer of the Grants Pass Active club. The Active club latched on to the idea as their Centennial project, it caught on immediately, and they have been sponsoring it ever since.

As the boatmen had predicted, it was a "natural" spectacular, and it was not long before people were viewing it from coast to coast via nationwide newsreel.

This is one boat race in which a straight line is not the shortest distance between two points, and racers must skillfully seek their channels if they want to stay in the running.

In covering the treacherous winding course between narrow canyons and dangerous riffles, many a boat has been "smashed out" of the race, but never has a driver been seriously injured. Every precaution is taken to see that it doesn't happen.

Guides Stationed

Experienced river guides are stationed at the more treacherous stretches, ready to go into action if anyone comes to grief. A Civil Air Patrol plane patrols the river to spot possible accidents and relay information. Southern Oregon Amateur Radio Operators are posted at intervals along the course to keep officials informed of progress.

The run courses over at least 10 major riffles and many minor ones.

In addition to skill in maneuvering, the aquatic hoarders must have equipment in good shape to stand the tremendous mechanical strain. Motors, "tuned to a gnat's eyelash" for maximum power and acceleration, are more apt to "blow."

Many other hazards have, through the years, removed contestants from the race. Drivers have fallen out on sharp turns, boats have "flipped," run into each other, rammed rocks. Some have even been known to reach the finish line with gaping holes in their bottoms.

Lost in Riffle

One year, half a dozen boats were lost on the first riffle. Some boats have even been lost in practice. Only one woman has ever run the race. She was Mrs. Kenny Frank, wife of a Klamath river guide, who rode the first Boatnik with her husband.

This year's festival will get under way next Saturday morning, when the Boatnik parade will be led through downtown Grants Pass with State Sen. President Ben Musa as marshal.

Saturday afternoon, in the city's Riverside park, a Boatnik Queen will be crowned, chosen from the six princesses who have been busy with public appearances for the past month. A program of closed course hydroplane races will follow the coronation, competing in various classes and sizes under sanctioned rules.

From the same point in the city park, the white water race to Galice and back will get under way at 1:30 p.m. Sunday — and return about an hour later.

Only one thing about this race can be predicted: It's bound to provide plenty of excitement — all the way.

TEEN-AGERS MAY WORK

Portland—The State Wage and Hour Commission decided Thursday to permit teenagers to take some jobs at fishing and boating resorts.

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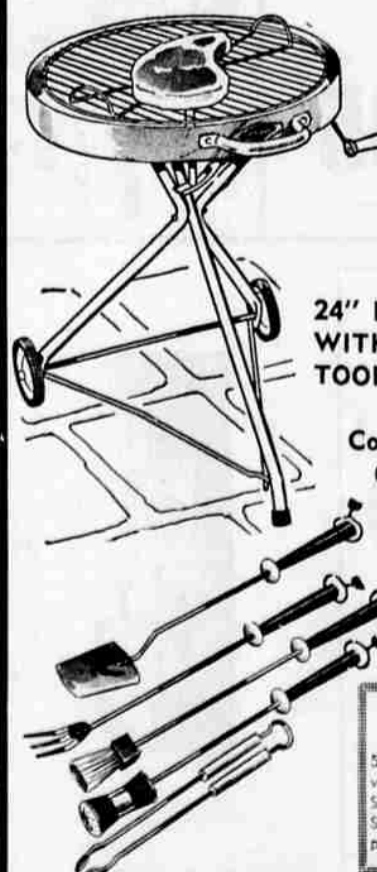
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