

PADDLING PEOPLE - Joan Morison OAM

As told to Ross Winters.

This article is the first of an occasional (ie, when I get around to it) series of profiles on people who I have met and have found to have an interesting story to tell. The first person I managed to harass into answering my questions was Joan Morison from Sutherland Canoe Club. Joan was awarded the Order of Australia for her efforts to promote canoeing, including teaching canoeing, administration at both State, and national levels coaching development (to mention just a few things).

But the most amazing fact I found out is that this year's Hawkesbury Classic was the 50th major canoeing marathon Joan has entered! These include 23 Hawkesburies, 12 Murray Marathons, 3 original 100 Milers (Penrith to Brooklyn), 10 circular 100 Milers (Penrith to Warragamba Gorge & return), World Masters Games Marathons and the USCA National Marathon, without the hundreds of other short marathon races, or even training, that's over 9000 km alone!



Completing the 1996 Hawkesbury Canoe Classic

Qu Just how did you get into Canoeing?

It's a long story Ross ... like my age! Ready for it? I joined the YHA when I left school, went to a few Hostels, joined their Bushwalking Club, YHA Campers Club, did some very intensive and tough walks for the next three years, then someone said why not hire canoes at Penrith, paddle up the Nepean to Norton's Basin instead of the usual long walk in. Sounded great! I was going with Bruce by this time, and we drew the "short straw" of the hire canoes. What a tub! A beaut weekend, but I vowed I'd never go canoeing again! However, several months later, our Xmas Truck Trip (two weeks of travel and walks) was heading towards the Murray River. "What about all of us paddling part of this river during the trip?" said our fearless leader. Enthusiastic response. "Well, we'll need canoes, none to hire down there." So Bruce bought a copy of RCC's "Canoes and Their Construction", selected design No.2, a 16' canadian of composite design, bought the materials. Then it was decided our schedule would not have time to spare for canoeing!! Foiled again! So, the ribs and stringers of our canoe became a constant source of annoyance for Bruce's parents. For two years they lay in the hallway (regularly tripped over) whilst the smaller sections became part of his bedroom decor! Then we really got involved in Canoeing, for RCC, like our own Camper's Club, was a member of the Federation of Bushwalking Clubs. We met RCC people at Federation Re-Unions, went to their meetings, and couldn't afford to join, so we started the YHA Canoe Club. This was 1949, a significant year for Canoeing, We got heavily involved in the start of NSW Canoeing (there's only four of us left now) with the ACF forming two days after the NSWCA. As a member of RCC Ross, you can feel justly proud of the men involved at the beginning of "organised" Canoeing all of whom were RCC members. Their administrative expertise was "tops" and one of them, Ted Riley, said he recognised administrative ability in me, so he "conned" me into a deep involvement of the sport ... one that I remain with to this day!

Qu: To have paddled 50 major Marathons is a remarkable feat. What drives you?

A Holden Commodore! Okay! Okay! I'll be serious. I can see that wasn't the answer you were looking for. Marathon is a challenge, as you yourself know. The early Marathons of the 1950s began because of a group of people around a campfire wondered could it be done! 100 Miles non-stop! They were "heady" days, all "seat of the pants" stuff. No equipment, no coaching knowledge like to-day, just the desire to see if it could be done. The major blow for me was that women were not allowed to enter the first event in 1951.

Qu: Why was that?

They said it would render us unable to have children! They also didn't think a solo kayak could do it either!

The solo kayakers fought and were eventually accepted into the first race and proved them all wrong when Carl Toovey in his Klepper kayak arrived at the finish, got out, checked out the camp, before waking up the judges to tell them he had finished!

As for us girls, the fight continued for months. We won the right to enter in the second race in 1952. The current



Joan's first 100 miler From Back right in a clockwise direction, Lillian McCallum, Millie, Joice McCallum, Joan

Hawkesbury Classics are so easy by comparison. Shorter, lots of checkpoints, well organised. Our main opponents to women entering failed to finish. The following year I had my first child, which put paid to the suggestion we'd never have children. In this period I completed three 100 Milers, having a child in the in between years.

Qu: *Fifty years is a long time to be canoeing. I guess you've paddled many boats in that time?*

Sure have! Canoes, kayaks, Polo boats ... singles, doubles, you name it!

Qu: *Which one did you enjoy the most?*

"Silly Symphony" the first of our canoes. Bruce and I paddled hundreds of miles in Canoe Touring in "Silly". All boats had a name back then. Ours got its name from the Disney characters I painted all around it. It had three skins all told. It did some mighty rivers, which alas are now gone. Wollondilly, Warragamba, Kangaroo Shoalhaven, all pre-dam. It was a heavy canoe built for the Snowy, which we were unable to do because of financial problems. No one had a car. All trips were done with canoes carried on top of trucks which carried you to the start, picking up at the finish point.

Qu: *There are photos of those trucks in the RCC archives. What was it like?.*

Yes, RCC was well set up. They had three trucks on my first trip. YHA and the Cruising Club had one each. As a smaller club we travelled with gear in the back. Very uncomfortable by today's standards, but nobody minded or complained then. I recall arriving at the river that first trip .. Bandon Grove Bridge on the Williams, which was in raging flood! What the hell were we doing here? I saw one of the RCC canoes get smashed in two on the bridge. It was noisy. One had to talk over the roar of the water. We packed, too late to back out, the driver had already gone to Clarencetown!



*Under Brandon Grove Bridge on the Williams river in 1950.
From Left Bruce, Jeff? Joan and Charlie Horman in Silly
Symphony*

This was "Silly Symphony's" maiden voyage, our first real white water and we had a passenger! No worries! RCC's club Secretary took us under his wing. "Follow me and do what I do!" He disappeared down the first grade three whooping and hollering and swearing at his bowhand. Our passenger, clad in ancient woollen swim trunks and a wool vest, gripped the gunwhales firmly. He didn't paddle! It was drizzling rain and Bruce and I pretended we were unafraid. Yoiks!

This was fun! We were blooded into whitewater touring and we never looked back, even though we'd enter Marathons and Sprint Championships, it was our first love.

Qu: *What was the worst meal you had on a canoe trip?*

Sardines and raw carrot! We were told it was healthy, but it was ghastly! Mainly due to the situation I think, an Easter on the Kangaroo/Shoalhaven.

One of the worst floods we paddled in. No Tallowa Dam back then. The group had already lost a canoe and most of their gear, the paddlers placed in two other canoes. We shared meals with the unfortunate paddlers. The sardines and raw carrot being one donation to a mixed meal. Yuk!

Qu: *Over the years you must have met some interesting people who do you remember and why?*

There are so many such characters. In each of the eras we paddled we met a few unforgettable ones. One in particular comes to mind from the 1960s. Roger was his name. A skilled paddler. Did the Nymboida in an open canoe, but "open" is somewhat of a misnomer. All canoes were well spray sheeted. Not much water was taken in. He was a real individual. Bearded, daggy clothes, battered hat, talked with a nasal inflection due to a speech defect, but what made him unique was his canoe gear.

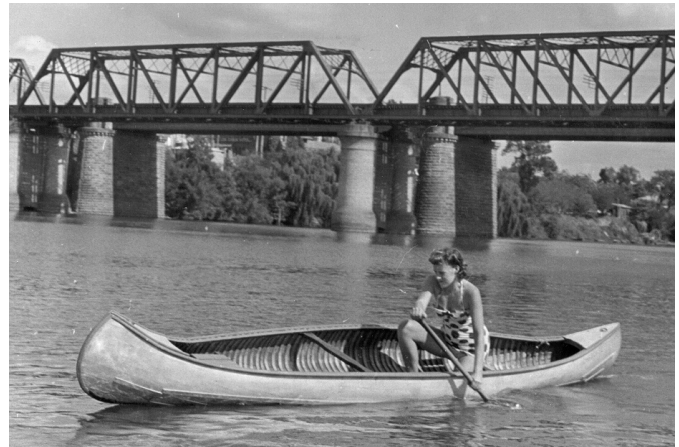
One large drum, also battered, and a carpet roll wrapped in a waterproof groundsheet. He would open out his roll of carpet, empty the contents of his drum around him, eat a meal, then curl up in the carpet for the night! He was a typical Aussie "bushy", seldom without a smile, friendly, reliable, good paddler who made canoesport unforgettable. He could also load five Canadians canoes on his Maurice Oxford! Fair dinkum!

Qu: What is your favourite place, river? Why?

Without hesitation, the Wollondilly river system. Sadly it no longer exists. We consider ourselves fortunate to have paddled in an era when the rivers were pristine and unpolluted. The Upper and Lower Wollondilly, the mighty Warragamba were only an hour and a half from Sydney. They were regular trips on our club calendar. We were able to paddle them in a variety of water levels. We loved the Burratorang Valley so much we even honeymooned there in the Knoll Guest House. Warragamba Dam has brought water to an ever growing Sydney, but imagine the gorge in flood! Even in low water the rapids were grade two and three. When the dam was under construction we did trips, portaging between the coffer dams. Once we were allowed to paddle through the tunnel of the old small weir, saving a portage up and over it. Your club has paddled the Gamba before that original weir was built.

Qu: What's the funniest thing that happened to you on a canoe trip?

So many funny incidents, but on reflection, one stands out. I didn't think it funny at the time, but later . . . we call it the "dead cow incident". It happened on the first Hawkesbury Classic in 1977. The first three races were in September. Pea soup fogs were the order of the day! We were in Milkmaid Reach, that very wide reach as you paddle towards the Webb's Creek Ferry and Checkpoint I. We were in an old K2 a wooden, chine built, reasonably fast and well suited for that river. Bruce could just see me in the bow. I could only see about two metres. We had been hugging the left bank and had passed an awful smell, a dead cow. We knew we had to cross the river so we did not miss the turn into Wiseman's Ferry. We aimed straight across, it was an eerie sensation. Suddenly we were zooming along at great speed! We'd been against the tide minutes before. Had it changed? We thought we'd headed for the right bank, then we smelled the dead cow! The tide had turned us around. We veered left until we found the right bank, then hugged the shore to Webb's, not leaving it until rounding the corner and the safety of Wiseman's and Checkpoint I! All thanks to a dead cow!



Ladies TC1 200 yards. Joan high kneeling at Penrith

Qu: What is one of your proudest moments in canoeing?

Undoubtedly when I received my Order of Australia in 1992. I was totally flabbergasted when the initial letter arrived asking me if I would accept the nomination.

Bruce still says it's the only time he's seen me lost for words! Naturally I cried. It was a great honour. One never knows who sends in such a nomination, and it needs several testimonials. I knew that to be so for I had previously sent in information on others.

The great day arrived. I was presented to the Governor of NSW, His Excellency, Rear Admiral Peter Sinclair AO for Services to Canoeing and Kayaking. Proud is the word alright! It was great to see another canoeist there on the day receiving a bravery award, Greg Bell.

Qu: Canoeing seems to have filled your life. Have you any other hobbies?

Lots! Home-type ones like sewing, knitting, cooking. Other sports like 10 pin bowling. We competed in the first World Masters in Toronto. I got my best game on that occasion, 245. I used to play Hockey, bushwalk, then my other loves are poetry and writing. I had hoped to be a Journalist, but back in my era, women Journos were a "no no" so I went into office work, writing stories editing various canoeing newsletters and magazines. I've had a few published, written one or two books, including the first of my Challenge of Canoeing Series, Slalom, NSW Canoeing & Marathon Histories and of course, with the Touring Committee of the day, producing the first NSW River Touring Guide for Canoeing. Canoeing Histories and a couple of Novels are in the pipeline at the moment.

Qu: If you were to run an invitation canoe trip, where would it be and whom would you invite?

Now that's the toughest question so far! Our canoeing has spanned 50 years. That's a lot of rivers and a lot of paddlers. We have great friends in all disciplines. It would need several trips to accommodate all their tastes, but truly, if I could turn back the clock (or blow up the dams???) the Wollondilly/Warragamba would be our choice.

In our wooden canadian, which, for those that have never paddled a wooden canoe, is vastly different to your fibreglass jobs and plastic play boats. It answers differently to the river's flow! It is alive! Like the feel of a

wooden paddle. One could lean out and drink the water if thirsty (try that to-day!) trail a spinner, catch a perch for tea! Yum! Make camp where the farmer welcomes you and provides a billy of milk! Thrill to the mighty rapids of the Gamba, your wooden craft dipping and weaving like a living thing answering your paddle strokes like a puppet on a string! That era was wonderful! No one wore a PFD unless you were a non swimmer. So much has changed, including us.

Our most important contribution to-day is teaching basic skills in canoe and kayak for we firmly believe, once the basics are in place, a paddler can develop skill progression and go on to paddle any craft in any discipline with confidence. Add to this knowledge of coaching ... the sport is their oyster and anything is possible!

Qu: So after a long day's paddle, what is your favourite drink?

How about joining me with a Coke? TV tells us things go better with Coke. I drink a lot of it you know in Marathons. We all hear about the Caffeine, but it has other elements of benefit, like potassium. Without going into pros and cons, I like it and find it refreshing. I don't drink coffee, which has a bigger caffeine content, not too much tea, lots of water, so healthwise it only becomes a problem when one drinks it every day and never exercises! I think a can of Coke is more beneficial than a can of beer don't you? Well ... drinkers don't always agree! Cheers Ross! I feel we've just completed another Marathon! An interview Marathon!



Joan paddling in the Circular 100milers in the 1970's